Less than Zero Study Guide

Less than Zero by Bret Easton Ellis

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

In 1985 Less Than Zero burst onto the literary scene. The book was a commercial success, and garnered much critical attention. As a result, its author, Bret Easton Ellis, was catapulted into the public eye. The story touches on themes of alienation, moral detachment, death, and nihilism in its portrayal of overprivileged youth in contemporary Los Angeles. Critics hailed it as the □voice of a new generation□ and the □first MTV novel.□ The novel is narrated by Clay, a college student home on vacation, as he observes his friend slip deeper into drugs and prostitution. His detached and dispassionate view of the dissipation and corruption around him is often interpreted as a comment on modern-day society.

Author Biography

On March 7, 1964, Bret Easton Ellis was born in Los Angeles, California. He attended Benning-ton College in Vermont, graduating in 1986. His first novel, *Less Than Zero,* began as an assignment for a creative writing course, which was taught by the writer Joe McGinniss. Published in 1985, the novel appeared when the author was only twenty-one. It attracted much critical and popular attention, and Ellis became a very public figure. *Less Than Zero* was adapted to the screen and produced by Twentieth Century Fox in 1987.

Ellis's second novel, *The Rules of Attraction,* was published in 1987. His third novel, *American Psycho,* was published in 1991 and is perhaps his most controversial work for its portrayal of violence against women and its themes of materialism and morality. The Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women boycotted the book. *American Psycho* was adapted to the screen in 2000. In 1994 he published a collection of short stories titled *Informers.* Ellis's most recent work, *Glamorama,* was published in 1999.

Plot Summary

Freeways and Billboards

A student at an East Coast college, Clay is a young man on Christmas break, spending his time off in his hometown of Los Angeles. His girlfriend, Blair, picks him up from the airport. One of her comments strikes Clay, and is worked into the rest of the novel at various key moments: "People are afraid to merge onto the freeway in Los Angeles." Clay's repetition of "people are afraid to merge" is an echo of E. M. Forster's phrase "only Connect"□ the words that preface *A Passage to India*□and Ellis 's phrase encapsulates the disconnected and empty life he finds back in California.

In the first section of the book Clay describes a series of parties and family meetings leading up to Christmas. He spends time with his friends Daniel, Trent, Julian and Blair; he easily falls back into the promiscuity, parties, and drugs. Clay has one-night stands with men and women, and uses cocaine frequently. Clay's relationships with his family and Blair grow more strained, and he begins repeating the key set of phrases more and more often.

Parties and Cocaine

The narrative shifts through more scenes of parties, nightclubs, and diners. In a thematically significant image, an old lady collapses from the heat at La Scala. The crowd looks on, bored. As the vignettes become more brutal and detached, Clay's memories of time he spent in Palm Springs become more poignant. He remembers closing the family home, and his grandmother's fear of death. In the house of his childhood recollections, "strange desert winds have taken over."

Clay continues to look for Julian, who owes him money. He is now spending more and more time with his dealer, Rip, in abrupt and confused vignettes of people and parties. Clay watches a televangelist preaching about redemption, and the phrase "this is a night of Deliverance" haunts him as he leaves for a meeting with Blair. Their date is awkward, and on the way home Blair hits a coyote in the road. Clay watches the animal die for ten minutes. Later he and Blair go home and have passionate sex.

Clay's cocaine use escalates and it results in more nosebleeds, just as his memories of his grandmother's cancer envision her coughing up blood. At Trent's party in Malibu, the crowd is fascinated by a snuff film depicting the brutal torture and murder of two young people. Daniel, who is aroused by the film, says he's not coming back to college with Clay because he is going to make violent sex movies. As his Los Angeles friends become stranger, Clay stops going to the psychiatrist.

The Girl on the Bed

After visiting his old elementary school, Clay finals runs into Julian, who tells him to come to Finn's house to get the money he's owed. It becomes clear that Julian is a prostitute. Clay is sent out on an appointment with him, and watches as Julian goes through with his "trick." The key phrases of the novel come together in this scene, and Clay thinks, "You can disappear here without even knowing it."

They return to Finn's and Julian tells him that he wants to stop hustling. Finn quiets his attempt to leave the business by injecting him with heroin. Clay goes to The Roxy, where the body of a drug overdose victim is being stared at by a crowd of his acquaintances. Rip asks them all if they'd like to see something that will "blow their minds": a naked and stoned twelve-year-old girl tied to the bed in Rip's bedroom. As Daniel and the rest take turns raping her, Clay leaves the house after a lame attempt to stop the abuse. Rip follows to ask what his problem is, and explains that he has, "nothing left to lose."

Leaving Los Angeles

Clay has a painful lunch with Blair. She asks if he ever loved her, and when he says no, she tells him that it's hard to love someone who doesn't care. He replies that it's too painful to care. In the final paragraph of the novel, Clay discusses a song about Los Angeles that he hears just before he returns to college. In a description that acts as a comment on his life, he explains that the song fills his head with images "so violent and malicious that they seemed to be my only point of reference for a long time afterwards. After I left."

Part 1

Part 1 Summary

Less Than Zero is the story of college-age people living in Los Angeles in the mid-1980's. As the story begins, Clay, the protagonist of the story, has just been picked up at the airport by his girlfriend, Blair. It is Christmas break, and Clay has been away at school in New Hampshire for 4 months for his freshman year in college. Clay focuses on a statement that Blair makes, "People are afraid to merge onto the freeway in Los Angeles."

Clay repeats the statement over and over in his head like some sort of mantra. Blair drops Clay off at his mother's house which is empty but smells like pine. The house is immaculate and Clay is alone except for the new cleaning woman whom Clay has never met. Apparently, Clay's mother and sisters are out Christmas shopping.

Clay tries to call his friend, Julian, but is not able to reach him, and Clay's thoughts turn to Muriel, who Blair has just informed him is anorexic. In fact, Blair thinks that Clay looks too pale, too.

That evening is the night of Blair's Christmas party, and Clay arrives with Daniel, who is new to the group. The home is filled with kids from high school who are drinking and using drugs, and Clay looks around for Julian, who is his usual drug connection. Julian is nowhere to be seen but Clay does see Trent, a friend who is a male model, who tells Clay to get a tan and hands him a business card for a Uva bath, which dyes skin to mimic a suntan.

Over the next few days Clay spends time with his mother and sisters with whom he does not get along and also goes to lunch and out for drinks with other friends to catch up on everyone's lives. There is also a brief visit with his psychiatrist, who Clay notices perks up only when Clay discusses any sexually related comments.

Part 1 Analysis

Clay is the protagonist of the story, which is told in narrative style so everything is seen through his eyes. Being away from Los Angeles for 4 months has changed Clay, and the others cannot identify the difference; their only comment is that Clay looks pale. The superficiality of the 1980's is reflected in the comments and the activities that these young people consider to be important. The need for drugs and alcohol is followed closely by the need to look tan and perfect.

The author introduces the theme of alienation as Clay's friends can sense something different about him but cannot define it. Clay and his mother share an awkward lunch and have little or nothing to say to each other. Clay is even more removed from his teenaged sisters who don't even get named in the story.

Part 2

Part 2 Summary

Clay and Trent go to dinner before attending another party with friends. Blair is already stoned when she sees Clay and gives him a Christmas gift of a scarf, which he wears for the evening. Eventually, Clay meets with his drug dealer, Rip, and the two do some hits of cocaine in an upstairs bathroom.

Stoned and drunk on champagne, Clay agrees to go home with Griffin and awakes the next morning at 4:30 and walks out past the maid who says nothing to him and doesn't think it strange that a half naked young man is leaving the house at that hour of the morning. On the way home, Clay is distracted by a billboard which says "Disappear here." Not wanting to ponder the possible message, Clay speeds home and finds a Ferrari parked in the driveway next to his mother's car. Inside the house, Clay realizes that his mother's bedroom door is closed and probably locked with company inside.

Having set his alarm clock for 11:00 Clay swims some laps in the pool before heading to Century City to have lunch with his father, a movie industry executive. At lunch, Clay's father spends more time making business contact than talking with Clay, which makes it easy for Clay to dismiss his father's tepid attempts at conversation. Clay knows that he'll leave the lunch with his wallet reinforced, and that is all that matters.

Clay's father wants to know whether Clay would like to go to Palm Springs for Christmas, which sends Clay into a reverie about skipping school one day to go to Palm Springs to visit the house he grew up in. The neighborhood had gone downhill, but Clay was more saddened by his memories of childhood than the state of disrepair.

On the way home, Clay stops at Cedars Sinai Medical Center to visit Muriel, who has been hospitalized for anorexia. The two have little to say to each other, and Clay is glad he stopped but also glad to leave since Muriel's appearance has unnerved him.

Back in the car, Clay is verbally accosted by some gay men in traffic and has to pull off into a side street to smoke a cigarette and regain his composure. Finally, he makes it to the café where he has agreed to meet Rip. As Clay waits outside, a black Porsche pulls up, and Julian emerges. Clearly uncomfortable to see Clay, Julian makes small talk and then abruptly makes his way back to the car in which Clay thinks someone is waiting.

Later on at Rip's apartment, Rip tells Clay that he must have gone to the wrong café and that's why they never connected but neither one is upset. Clay just needs his next fix and pulls out his wallet to pay Rip.

Part 2 Analysis

The theme of futility is emerging even stronger as the book evolves. The characters are all children of privilege who have enormous amounts of money to buy drugs and designer clothes but have no sense of connection with their parents. Clay's lunch with his father is not a special event, even though Clay has been away at school and hasn't seen his father for 4 months. The father thinks that money is the answer for everything and has more interest in his own business connections at lunch, even introducing Clay as his son but never saying his name. Clay's mother has her own self-absorbed lifestyle, too, and Clay is not at all surprised to see the Ferrari of another one of his mother's boyfriends in the driveway when he returns home. The writing conveys an overwhelming sense of isolation, and Clay seems to want some connection somewhere, so he visits Muriel in the hospital even though the conversation between the two is a bit awkward. The search for some connection lands Clay in a homosexual encounter one night with discussion about his relationship with Blair on another. Clay's sense of anonymity and futility seems to be punctuated by the message of "Disappear Here" on the billboard, which seems too close for comfort or analysis.

Part 3

Part 3 Summary

Clay and Blair go to Daniel's for another Christmas party, and Daniel is already stoned when the two arrive. Blair would rather spend time alone with Clay as she senses that their relationship is in some jeopardy. Leaving the party early, Clay and Blair drive around awhile and end up at Blair's house where they make love and they end the evening with a blasé goodbye.

The next day, which is Christmas Eve, Clay and his regular group of friends spend the day at the beach. Later that day, Daniel calls Clay to tell him that Vanden, a girl Daniel had been dating in New Hampshire, has revealed that she's pregnant. Curious about what to do, Clay urges Daniel to at least call Vanden but Daniel opts not to.

Finally, Christmas Eve night has arrived and Clay finds himself with his estranged parents and two sisters at Chasen's restaurant for dinner. Everyone continually drinks champagne, even the underage children, and the dinner is consumed over strained conversation. After dinner, the family proceeds to Jimmy's for more drinks and from where they phone Clay's grandfather in Palm Springs to wish him a Merry Christmas.

Thankfully, the horrid evening comes to a close, and Blair calls Clay at home and tries to entice him with the fact that she is calling from her bed where she is lying nude and that the rest of her family is away for the evening. Clay does not go to see Blair; however, they do talk on the phone all night, and when they finally hang up it is nearly dawn on Christmas morning.

Clay remembers last Christmas in Palm Springs where the weather was so hot he couldn't sleep in spite of the joints he smoked.

This year Clay is high on coke for Christmas morning and opening gifts is an exercise in indifference for the whole family punctuated mainly by the refilling of champagne glasses.

On the day after Christmas, Clay awakens and walks past his mother's bedroom where his two sisters lie on the bed in their swimsuits and watch a porn movie with the sound muted. Clay continues to the swimming pool to swim laps and remembers a night when he and his two sisters were driving in Palm Springs when they saw what appeared to be a bonfire in the distance. The closer they got to the light, though, they realized that it was a car that was on fire with a mother and her children standing a little bit away from it.

Clay and his sisters did not stop, but Clay could swear that he saw a child's body burning over the flames coming from the engine. The next day, Clay checked the newspaper to confirm or deny what he thought he saw but found nothing. What he did

find were other stories of horrific deaths and ever since began his habit of perusing the paper for gruesome stories to add to a growing collection.

Part 3 Analysis

All the characters are in some stage of desperation and are trying to numb the intensity of any possible alienation and pain. Blair's attempt to hold onto Clay by seducing him is the only alternative she has left, but Clay does not seem to reciprocate what she is feeling. The family holiday is painfully dysfunctional and survived only by the opening of many bottles of champagne. The old maxim of "what can you give someone who has everything" is glaringly apparent throughout this holiday season of these spoiled and privileged people, young and old.

Clay does make some attempt to do the right thing, although it is a struggle, by telling Daniel that he should call Vanden to discuss her pregnancy. Daniel, however, is unmoved, and the cycle of lost children begins anew with his indifference toward the child he has fathered.

Clay has some sense of connection to the past since he experiences flashbacks more frequently now. It's as if he needs to know that at some point in his life, things may have been authentic and love existed, and the people who surrounded him were more than beautifully coiffed shells.

Part 4

Part 4 Summary

It is now New Year's Eve, and Clay and Blair have arrived at Kim's house for a party. Kim is already stoned when they arrive and the gathering is only a dozen people, small for a holiday party. Clay is half-stoned and not in the mood to hang out with these people and wants to leave but is distracted when Muriel locks herself in a bathroom and the others burst in to find her shooting heroin.

At midnight, Clay hears the typical fireworks and celebrations from nearby parties, but eventually, he and Blair make it an early night and he goes home alone and watches some evangelists on TV.

The next day, Clay gets a phone call from Rip telling him that Julian is looking for Clay and will meet him at the Chinese theater later that afternoon. Julian never shows up and Clay drives over to Trent's house to talk for awhile and then drives to Julian's house where Clay sees a girl who is stoned and drunk at the pool. Because Julian is nowhere to be seen, Clay prepares to leave and runs into Julian on the way out.

Julian and Clay leave together to talk at a restaurant at the Galleria where Julian asks to borrow money to pay for an abortion for a girl he knows. Clay agrees to lend the money, but the amount seems extraordinarily high for an abortion. Julian will not reveal any other reason. Apparently, Julian's parents have frozen his checking account and credit cards, and he is desperate for the cash. As the two boys browse at the Galleria, Clay can't help but remember all the fun he and Julian had in school.

Part 4 Analysis

The use of recreational drugs runs rampant in this story as these characters muddle through aimless lives in chemically induced stupors. The sole motivation in their lives seems to be the acquisition of the next drug. Clay snorts cocaine and drinks excessively but has not shot up heroin, even though it seems to be common as evidenced by the episode with Muriel. Alcohol is consumed without reservation, and there are no parental restrictions, especially when the adults are either not available or condone the lifestyle by providing the liquor. Julian is in some sort of trouble and needs money from Clay claiming that the money is for an abortion, but Clay senses that Julian is in bigger trouble with a drug dealer based on the large sum of money he needs.

Part 5

Part 5 Summary

Blair, Kim, and Clay drive to Westwood to go to the movies and see another friend, Lene, after the show. Lene tells them that she was on MV3 today as she and her boyfriend were dancing. Blair and Kim had seen Lene on the show but thought she looked bad, so they pretend that they did not see the show. After Lene leaves with her boyfriend, Blair and Kim continue talking about how bad Lene looked on the show.

The next night Trent calls Clay because he is out of cocaine and can't find Rip, his dealer. Trent and Clay decide to go to a movie at the new Beverly Center and marvel at how clean and white the facility is. After the show, the boys see Ronnette, a girl that Clay had met at a party and the two boys give Ronnette a ride home.

The next day, Clay takes the money he is lending to Julian to Julian's house. Julian is half passed out on his bed watching MTV. Acknowledging Clay's presence, Julian does not get up and still refuses to tell Clay the real reason he needs the money. As Clay waits, Julian falls asleep again as another music video flashes on the screen. Clay leaves without waking Julian.

Rip finally surfaces and wants to meet Clay at La Scala Boutique for lunch and a little business. By the time Rip finally shows up at the restaurant, Clay has had time to finish three glasses of wine. As Clay presses Rip for the drugs he is supposed to have with him, an old woman falls down on the other side of the street. Even as the ambulance arrives for the woman, most of the people in La Scala don't even see her.

Clay pays a visit to his psychiatrist, who tells Clay about a new idea he has for a screenplay. Clay couldn't be less interested even though the doctor presses on explaining the project and eventually asking for Clay's help with the writing. Clay's decline of the offer launches the doctor into a monologue about how Clay had promised to become more active and involved. Clay merely puffs on a clove cigarette and stares out a window in response.

Clay drives to Trent's apartment close to UCLA, where Trent stays when classes are in session. Rip, who is now Trent's dealer, answers the door and announces that Atiff, another friend from high school is inside. Atiff, dressed in Gucci loafers and an Italian suit, drives a new Mercedes and attends USC as a freshman. Trent is just emerging from the shower demanding to know if reservations have been made at Morton's while another friend, Chris, is frantically making phone calls trying to locate some meth.

Clay debates about whether to do some coke now or wait until after they reach the restaurant. Trent comments that there is somebody passed out on Chris' bedroom floor and someone thinks the boy's name is Alan and the boys leave him on the floor and head out for the evening.

Part 5 Analysis

The author expertly shows the disassociation of all the characters with real life in that they are always viewing something, never interacting. To avoid talking, they watch MTV endlessly and go to the movies for several nights in a row. Lene is pleased to have been on MV3 and the other girls watched the show even though they deny it. Clay watches TV evangelists when he can't sleep and Julian passes out in front of the television after he's done drugs.

Consequently, when real-life events do occur, the characters view them as if they were scripted and shown on a TV program. When the old woman collapses on the street, no one within the restaurant seems to notice or come to her aid even when the ambulance sirens are heard. When Alan is passed out on the bedroom floor in the apartment, the boys are blasé about it and don't make any attempt to get help even though Alan has been in that condition for more than 2 days.

Part 6

Part 6 Summary

Clay, Trent, and Blair are at Spago for appetizers and drinks, and Trent bemoans the fact that he has agreed to help his mother supervise cactus plantings at their home tomorrow. Driven by guilt that he doesn't really do anything for his mother, Trent also realizes that another friend, Sandy, will be there and will probably have some great cocaine with him. The possibility of the drug brightens Trent's outlook on the upcoming day.

When Blair leaves for a few minutes, Clay shares with Trent that the relationship between Clay and Blair is over. Clay has not informed Blair of this fact yet, however, and Trent calls Clay tacky for such insensitive behavior.

After the trio leaves Spago, they head for a club called After Hours where Clay has an emotional breakdown and cries in the bathroom for 5 minutes. When Clay returns to the table, there are scribbles of the words "Help Me" written in red crayon on the placemats. Surrounding the words are about 20 names and phone numbers.

Clay eventually leaves with a young girl and they go to her house where she leads Clay to her bedroom. Clay removes his clothes and waits as the girl showers. After several minutes the girl emerges from the bathroom wrapped in a towel and tells Clay to lean back against the headboard and to put on a pair of sunglasses lying nearby. The girl proceeds to remove the towel and produces a tube of Bain de Soleil tan crème from the nightstand.

The girl squeezes some of the lotion from the tube and begins to touch herself intimately and motions for Clay to do the same thing. After awhile Clay reaches for the girl but she pushes him away and continues to pleasure herself and Clay does the same. Afterwards, the girl gets up, turns off the stereo and turns on MTV. Clay watches the girl put on a robe and light a cigarette and stare at him and takes that as his cue to leave. The girl warns Clay not to make too much noise and wake her parents as he goes down the stairs.

The next day brings another visit to Clay's psychiatrist. Clay is a little unnerved that he is sneezing blood as a result of his cocaine use, but he is more troubled by the fact that he is having another crying jag. The psychiatrist watches Clay and asks him what Clay feels are the issues to which Clay offers up that it could be his parents, his friends or possibly even the drugs. The psychiatrist feels that it is positive that Clay can at least identify some of these possibilities and wants to change the subject. Clay cries and wants to know what will become of him, and the psychiatrist tells him not to be so mundane.

Clay remembers a time when the family was in Palm Springs for his grandfather's birthday and the adults are conversing vacantly while they drink the afternoon away. Someone suggests that it's time to make airline reservations to return home, but the news of a plane crash in San Diego squelches any more talk along that line. Clay's father thinks that the idea of getting stoned, boarding a plane and then having it crash would be the best way to die because you wouldn't know anything about it. When pushed, Clay's grandmother admits that she wouldn't want to die in any way.

Clay is on his way to Trent's house when he sees Rip and Spin drive up next to him and invite him to go to the Hard Rock Café. Spin shares that he has some great drugs for the afternoon which reminds them all of Julian, whom none of them see anymore.

After dinner, Rip, Clay, and Trent go to the house of a man named Dead, who is in his mid-forties, and is hosting a pool party of young men and women who stare vacantly at each other. Dead turns over a quantity of drugs to Rip, and Dead cautions Rip to be careful in a certain area of town because of the narcotics police. One of Dead's boys was shot in the leg trying to escape not too long ago.

After the boys leave Dead's house, they try some of the cocaine while still sitting in the car. Eventually they drive to Westwood and play video games for 2 hours and stop only when they run out of quarters, and the attendant doesn't have change for their hundred-dollar bills. Out of options for the night, Clay, Trent, and Rip return to the car and finish the cocaine.

The next night, Clay attends a party at Blair's house in honor of an Australian film star who is in Los Angeles for some promotions. There is talk of some of the houses in Malibu that were destroyed recently by all the flash flooding. Blair will not meet Clay's eyes all evening though, and the two never connect during the whole night.

Part 6 Analysis

The theme of apathy is becoming more sustained as the book continues. Trent begrudgingly agrees to spend a few hours with his own mother. Clay's psychiatrist essentially ignores Clay's cries for help. Even the incident between Clay and the girl from the club is totally antiseptic. The girl is too blasé to engage in sexual intercourse, preferring masturbation for its relative anonymity.

The desperation is also building among the characters. Clay breaks down and cries twice and does not understand the source of his distress. At the club, 20 names and phone numbers surround the words "Help Me" written casually on a paper placemat. The aimlessness of a continuing round of drugs, MTV, and video games is a cycle from which these young people do not know how to extricate themselves. Clay seems to be the only one who may even have a hint that these lifestyles are not healthful, but he continues with his friends out of boredom.

Part 7

Part 7 Summary

Julian still has not contacted Clay since the day that Clay took the money to his house. Clay tries a couple phone numbers but no one seems to know for sure where Julian is, possibly Malibu or Palm Springs.

Later that night, Clay goes to a party at Kim's house where he meets a high school boy, Evan, who claims to be a good friend of Julian's. To get more information from Evan, Clay takes the boy to a McDonald's after school the next day, and it's clear that Evan does not know any more about Julian than anyone. Hints suggest that Evan is a boy prostitute and thinks that Clay has brought him here to proposition him.

At a club a few nights later, Clay sees something that startles him. Written next to a couple dirty jokes are the lines: "Julian gives great head. And is dead."

Another memory rushes back at Clay, this one, too, of being at his grandparents' home in Palm Springs. Clay's parents had taken his grandmother to a party at the home of a film director and Clay was home alone with his grandfather, who had been drunk and passed out. The house in the desert is eerily quiet at night, and Clay watches TV and listens to the winds outside his bedroom window.

The next time the group gets together, they try the new club called The New Garage, which is literally built in a parking garage. One of the boys, Dimitri, is stoned and pushes his hand through a plate glass window. After taking Dimitri to the emergency room, the rest of the crew sits in a coffee shop until 4 a.m. and then goes home.

Blair has agreed to go out with Clay, but before he leaves to pick her up, Clay watches another evangelist program on TV. Clay sits in front of the TV hoping for a sign from Jesus that the man had promised, but nothing comes, so Clay stops at the Polo Lounge for a drink before arriving at Blair's.

After the concert, Clay and Blair sit on the patio at Spago and drink Champagne Kirs. When Blair is ready to order a sixth drink, Clay questions her about whether she has had enough to drink, and Blair responds with hostility that she will drink whatever she wants.

When Clay and Blair are eating ice cream in an Italian ice cream parlor, Blair tells Clay that *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is on cable this week. The comment makes Clay wonder if there is some hidden meaning in Blair's bringing up the movie but decides to let it pass.

Blair is driving Clay home when the car strikes a coyote, which has run out onto the highway. Screaming, Blair tries to drive on but the animal is caught under the car and Blair is forced to stop the car and reverse. Clay gets out of the car and sees the mortally

injured coyote and stands transfixed as the coyote dies in front of him. Almost immediately, the flies begin to collect on the animal.

Blair and Clay drive to Blair's house. At home, Blair turns on the TV and takes some sedatives, and she and Clay go to bed.Later that night, Clay and Blair attend another party at Kim's house ,eventually find their way to the guest house, and end up frantically making love.

Clay has joined his father the next day for drinks at Trumps. Clay can't help but notice the new red Ferrari that his father is driving or the cowboy hat that he wears. Like all the times before, Clay's father is more interested in business contacts than his son, and when he asks Clay if he is ready to return to school in New Hampshire, Clay responds that he is.

After lunch, Clay drives to Kim's house to pick up a vest that Muriel had borrowed the night she shot up heroin in the bathroom. Kim is annoyed that Clay has not called before coming over, and he apologizes but he doesn't plan to stay; he only wants to get his vest and leave.

Clay accompanies Trent on another drug delivery to an executive at a record company. Apparently, the executive knows Julian, too, but does not know where he is, and Clay is becoming increasingly frustrated with not being able to locate Julian.

Later that day Trent invites Clay and Blair to a party to be held at a house in Malibu. When they arrive, the couple sees a house full of young men with extreme tans and short platinum hair. At one point, the group is led into a bedroom where a video is about to begin. The video shows a young couple being sexually assaulted and then mutilated and killed on camera. To Clay's dismay, the boys, including Trent, are all sexually excited by the grisly film.

Another memory overtakes Clay and he can see his grandmother looking so frail from the pancreatic cancer. One night she manages to come downstairs at dinnertime but doesn't eat anything. Clay smiles to remember that his grandmother did manage to smile when he told a joke, but Clay did not have the courage to look in her eyes.

The maid has let Alana into Clay's room although he is almost asleep and didn't know she was coming over. Alana reveals to Clay that she has just had an abortion, which leads Clay to think that it might have been Julian's child, but Alana says not, the boy is nobody that Clay would know. Clay lets Alana sleep in his bed that night while he sits by the pool until the morning when he takes Alana to breakfast.

Part 7 Analysis

Death is another important theme in the novel and Clay seems to be obsessed with it. There are mentions throughout the story such as the writing on the bathroom wall that Julian is dead. Clay is transfixed watching the coyote die by the side of the road. The torture and death video at the Malibu house intrigues everyone but Clay, and he is

moved time and again remembering the slow demise of his grandmother. Even the visit from Alana announces another death as she has just come from having an abortion.

Clay is distancing himself from his friends as the story continues as well. It seems perverse that the only thing to which these boys have responded strongly is a snuff film about torture and murder. Clay is sickened and cannot watch and does not understand their reactions.

There is compassion in Clay, too, as evidenced by Alana's coming over to see him after she has had an abortion. Instinctively, Alana knows that Clay is the only one in the group who is capable of caring about what she has experienced on all levels.

Stylistically, the author uses short vignettes as opposed to flowing chapters to showcase the staccato situations that punctuate the lives of these aimless characters. Each vignette seems purposeless with no real intent, which perfectly symbolizes the lives of the young people who are suffering despite their privileged status. By all appearances, the kids have everything anyone could ever want, but they are devoid of human feelings and purpose and essentially have less than zero.

Part 8

Part 8 Summary

Later that day, Clay visits Daniel, who is playing Atari in his bedroom. Daniel is preoccupied with the games and responds with one word answers when Clay talks to him, especially about the return to school in New Hampshire. Daniel is especially evasive when Clay reminds him of an obligation to his girlfriend, Vanden.

Daniel wants to talk about a 16-year-old girl who lives somewhere nearby and whose drug dealer spends all day shooting her full of drugs for the sport of being gangbanged at parties every night. Daniel thinks this would be a good concept for a screenplay, but Clay is repulsed by the thought of it. Clay tries to convince Daniel to consider returning to school, but his efforts seem to be in vain so Clay leaves.

From a phonebooth in Beverly Hills, Clay calls his psychiatrist to tell him that he will not be in today for his appointment. In fact, Clay will not be returning at all and is not bothered by the psychiatrist's threat to call Clay's mother.

Clay's memory flashes back again to his grandmother and how she died in a hospital room on the outskirts of the desert. Clay's mind re-plays card games with his grandmother and visiting her at the Bel Air Hotel, where she would give Clay candies, and at La Scala, where the old woman would sip red wine and hum to herself.

Clay's Christmas vacation is quickly drawing to a close and feeling nostalgic, he visits his old elementary school. There seem to be more flowers and trees growing now, but there are also more warning signs guarding against unwanted intruders. At the front gate, Clay almost turns to leave but decides to go in and finds himself in the bungalow where his third grade class had been held.

Meandering through the school unnoticed, Clay tries to find his old locker and eventually Clay finds the piano on which he played songs for a Christmas recital and plays a few notes. The sound startles him in the empty room so Clay leaves the school and walks back down the sidewalk never looking back.

Clay finally meets up with Julian at an arcade in the hopes of getting back the money Julian owes him. Julian informs Clay that there are some complications and that Clay must accompany him to the apartment of some man, and the money will be there. Clay doesn't understand why Julian can't just get the money and meet Clay somewhere, but Julian is adamant about the fact that Clay must go along with him.

The man with the money is Finn, whose penthouse apartment is on Wilshire Boulevard. Julian and Clay are met at the door by a surly young man with a deep tan and short platinum hair who ushers Julian and Clay into Finn's office at the end of a dark hallway. Finn is glad to see Julian whom he calls "his best boy" and validates reports that Julian's performance from last night was fantastic.

Julian urgently tries to get the money from Finn to pay Clay, but Finn has other plans. Apparently Finn is a pimp for young men and there is another appointment that Julian must keep before receiving any money. A man at the Saint Marquis Hotel has requested a male prostitute and another male to watch so Finn recruits Clay as the second part of the equation.

Julian is visibly upset by this and Finn speaks to him privately and Clay is able to discern that Julian has prostituted himself in order to pay drug dealers and now is into this lifestyle so deep that he cannot extricate himself in spite of his intentions. Clay is somehow removed from watching his friend's distress and agrees to go to the appointment at the hotel. Clay realizes now that the money is not what matters; he simply wants to see the worst thing that can happen.

Part 8 Analysis

The story is beginning to move to its climax now as Clay's time in Los Angeles is drawing to a close. Clay's attempts to convince Daniel to return to New Hampshire are in vain, and Clay realizes that another friend has been lost to the aimless oblivion of life in Los Angeles. Clay begins to sever ties and close up loose ends by canceling any more obligations with the psychiatrist and visiting his old elementary school.

The flashbacks to his grandmother continue but in this one, Clay's grandmother finally dies, and he thinks about the good times with her.This also is symbolic of the end of any more good in the life Clay used to know. His realization that Julian is a prostitute transports Clay to a surreal place at first, but he quickly accepts the situation since nothing is too unreal for his friends and the places they have gone in the drug-obsessed world they inhabit. Clay agrees to go along with Julian on this appointment as one last attempt at seeing how bad things can get.

Part 9

Part 9 Summary

Arriving at the San Marquis, Julian and Clay find the room of Mr. Erickson, a real estate businessman from Indiana. Clay briefly wonders is this man knows his father and how humiliating it would be if that were true. The man offers the boys a drink, but Julian and Clay refuse. Eyeing both the boys, the man finally asks which one is willing to have sex and Julian rises from his chair and tells Julian to remove his clothes as Clay watches from a chair positioned near a window.

Clay cannot help but have flashbacks of Julian kicking a soccer ball during a fifth-grade game. Clay desperately wants to leave as the man compliments Julian on his good looks but somehow the words do not come and Clay settles in prepared to see the worst.

When the man disappears into the bathroom for a few minutes, Clay looks into the man's wallet which is lying on the dresser. There are many business cards and pictures and Clay can't help but wonder if the woman in one of the pictures who is clearly the man's wife has any idea what her husband does on his trips to Los Angeles. Clay sees that Julian is sitting nervously at the edge of the bed so Clay turns on the stereo to break some tension. The man emerges from the bathroom and orders the stereo be turned off because he wants Clay to hear everything.

As Julian removes his underwear, Clay asks permission to use the bathroom where he locks the door and turns on the water to mask any noise. Clay tries to vomit several times but cannot do anything but flush the toilet several times. Finally Clay enters the room again where he sees Julian on the bed and he and the man both smile as the man rolls Julian over. Clay lights a cigarette and watches.

Five hours later, Julian and Clay emerge from the hotel to meet Finn at a club to get Clay's money. Clay has memories of Julian in high school when the two of them would smoke joints in Julian's Porsche and somehow that memory pales in comparison to how Clay sees Julian now.

The club is crowded when Julian and Clay arrive but Julian manages to get them moved quickly past the line of people outside and ushered inside. The two boys find Finn sitting at the back of the room and Finn introduces Lee, a new boy, who seems nervous on his first night of action. Finn stalls at giving Julian the money and promises to turn it over after one more encounter for Julian at a party later tonight.

Julian and Clay follow Finn and Lee to a house in Bel Air to the party. Finn introduces Julian to some people and Julian breaks away and disappears into the crowd. Clay finds a bathroom to do some coke, and while Clay stares at himself in the mirror, Julian bursts in followed closely by an irate Finn. Julian has refused to participate in tonight's

games and informs Finn that he wants out of the prostitute lifestyle. Julian's debt to Finn is met and Julian just wants the money for Clay so that he can leave.

Finn has no intention of releasing Julian from the bonds of the lifestyle because of the investment he has in the boy. Finn also works at destroying any shred of self esteem Julian may still have by accusing Julian of liking the life and essentially being a whore at the core of himself. Julian begs and pleads for release but Finn wrestles Julian to the floor where he shoots Julian's arm with heroin. Finn leads Julian to the upstairs where bedrooms emit moaning and screaming sounds. Clay turns away from the scene and leaves the house.

Part 9 Analysis

Clay's relationship with Julian seems to be the most important one throughout the story, which is told from Clay's narrative position. Julian has very little dialogue or interaction in the actual story but Clay is consumed with finding him and helping him at all times. Julian is also a key figure in Clay's memory flashbacks. During Julian's encounter with the man in the hotel room, Clay uses the memory tactic to remove himself from the situation he views but is unable to alter the negative situation in spite of his warm feelings for Julian.

Given all this, it's a little surprising that Clay is emotionally distant when faced with Julian's true lifestyle choices. The author has chosen Julian as the symbol for the ultimate degradation in this drug-obsessed lifestyle, and Clay is characteristically ambivalent over the situation in which his friend finds himself.

Part 10

Part 10 Summary

After Clay leaves the party, he drives to The Roxy where he meets with Trent and Rip. Rip feels that there are too many Mexicans at the club tonight and offers Clay some coke because he doesn't look good. Another friend, Ross, tells the boys that he has discovered something in an alley that they must see so Clay, Trent, and Rip follow Ross outside to Rip's car. The boys drive down Melrose until they reach a building in a deserted area.

Following Ross, Trent, Rip, and Clay find themselves in a dark alley where they encounter two girls laughing and questioning Ross about where he found the guy they have just seen. The girls continue to giggle and make plans to bring their friends to witness what they have just seen.

After the girls leave, Ross leads the boys to the subject of all this discussion, a dead boy who is leaning against a building. Rip kicks the boy just to make sure he is dead and there is no sign of life. Clay is mesmerized by the dead boy and stares at him and the moths that fly around the boy's head in the light made from an overhead fixture. The boys stand around the dead boy and share a joint and wonder what they would do if the boy's eyes were to suddenly open.

The boys decide to leave but Rip tells them that there's something at his apartment that they just have to see. When Trent and Clay arrive at Rip's apartment, they realize that the attraction is a naked girl lying on a bed, her legs spread and tied to the bedposts. The girl's eyes are almost closed and she moans as she moves her head back and forth. One of the boys, Spin, shoots more drugs into her arm and tells the others that the girl is only 12 years old.

As Ross plays video games in the living room, Spin shoves his erect penis into the girl's mouth, and invites the others to watch. Clay leaves the bedroom and tells Rip that the situation is not right, but Rip tells Clay that if you want something, you have a right to take it. The same theory applies to doing whatever you want in Rip's mind. Clay tells Rip that this kind of behavior isn't necessary, that Rip has everything he needs, but Rip replies that he does not, he does not have anything to lose. Clay leaves Trent and Rip and heads out the door.

Part 10 Analysis

The story has reached its climax as Clay realizes that his friends are leading lives that no longer interest him. The depravity reaches a level in which Clay no longer wants to participate. The preoccupation with death and the emotional distance from it becomes entertainment for these young people who are unmoved by the sight of the dead young man in the alley.

The same theory applies to the situation of the girl tied to the bed. The boys have no qualms about keeping the girl filled with drugs so that they can sexually abuse her for their own entertainment. It is as if all these situations are merely scenes on MTV and they are voyeurs who are detached from any emotional connection. Self gratification is the religion of these boys and they are numb to any moral responsibility.

Part 11

Part 11 Summary

Clay remembers a party that was held at the home of a friend of one of his cousins. Somehow the party got out of hand and a young girl was brutally tortured, raped, and murdered. The girl's body was found at a drive-in theater hanging from a swing set in a parking lot. The cousin's friend disappeared and there was suspicion that he escaped to Canada or Mexico.

As Clay heads home tonight, he drives on the road where that house is located and thinks about today's events. Much has happened today starting with the episode with Julian and the Indiana man at the Saint Marquis. Clay continues driving further out into the desert and thinks about the nights when he would borrow his father's convertible and drive through the hot desert to feel the wind in his hair.

A few days before Clay has to leave to return to New Hampshire, he and Rip drive on Mulholland Drive where they encounter a treacherous turn. Rip stops the car and he and Clay get out to view the tangle of cars lying at the bottom of the hill. Rip shares that he has had friends who have died at this very location and that at night you can hear the cars screech and then the momentary silence before the crashing of metal below.

Returning to the car, Rip and Clay find themselves on a dead end street, and Clay asks why Rip chose this street and wonders where they are going. Rip replies that he isn't sure where they are going, it's just important that they are on the road.

Clay has lunch with Blair shortly before he leaves for school and Blair asks Clay if he had ever loved her. Clay replies that he never really did, and Blair thanks him for at least being honest. Clay asks Blair the same question in return, and Blair replies that you cannot love someone who does not care. Clay accepts the answer and is surprised when Blair calls a few days later to ask Clay not to return to New Hampshire, but Clay does not intend to stay in Los Angeles.

Clay remembers a song that he heard while on break in Los Angeles and the words and images stuck in his head for a long time. The images were of people of all ages being driven to the point of madness by living in the city. The images stayed with Clay even after he had left the city and were his only remembrances of Los Angeles for a very long time.

Part 11 Analysis

Finally it is revealed that Clay does have survival instincts and can escape the ravages of Los Angeles. However, Clay is the only one of the group of friends to leave and admittedly, the city retains a hold on Clay even after he is gone for awhile. In Clay's mind, he has cheated the death that surrounded him, not only in the graphic situations

of violence in the city but also in the zombie-like lives that his friends lead. Clay's efforts to convince any of the others to leave are ultimately futile since the friends all prefer the mind-numbing sameness and the comfort they find there. The lives of privilege bestowed on these young people are devoid of any emotional connections, and the cycle of actually having less than zero is destined to repeat itself.

Characters

Blair

Blair was Clay's girlfriend before he left for college. She picks him up from the airport in the opening of the novel, and they both spend most of the story unsure if they are still involved or not. They do sleep together a couple of times. In a scene near the end, Clay waits at a restaurant where he meets Blair, and she attempts to discuss their relationship; he is uncommunicative. The night before he leaves to go back to college, Blair calls him and asks him not to go.

Clay

Clay is the narrator and protagonist of the story. He is eighteen years of age, and has arrived home in Los Angeles for Christmas vacation after his first semester of college on the East Coast. Once home, he immediately falls back into his wide social circle; he begins to go from party to party, taking drugs, engaging in casual sex, and watching MTV and videos. Clay observes his social world with a detached, drug-induced passivity. There are signs that he longs for a deeper connection, shown by flashbacks to his childhood and happier times. He follows his friends and observes "the worst" in a deeper underworld of heroin addiction, prostitution and rape. The novel ends just before he goes back to college at the end of his vacation.

Clay's Father

Clay's parents are separated, and he sees his father several times over lunch at various restaurants. Clay and his father are unable to communicate with each other, and his father seems more interested in his business associates and his new car than he is in his own son.

Clay's Mother

Clay spends his vacation at home with his mother and two sisters. Clay and his mother are unable to communicate in any way, and his mother seems completely preoccupied and inattentive to her children. One night, Clay sees someone else's car parked in their driveway, indicating that his mother has brought home a man to stay the night.

Clay's Sisters

Clay has two sisters: one of whom he thinks is fifteen, and the other whom he thinks is thirteen. The lack of connection between Clay and his sisters is indicated by the fact that he never states their names.

Daniel

Daniel is a friend of Clay's fromLos Angeles. He goes to college with Clay on the East Coast.

Finn

Finn is Julian's pimp and heroin dealer. When Julian tries to break free from him, he abuses him and injects him with heroin to make him passive.

Julian

Julian is an old friend of Clay's. He has become a heroin addict and a prostitute to support his addiction. Julian borrows a large sum of money from Clay, and after Clay repeatedly asks to get the money back, Julian takes him up to see Finn, his pimp and drug dealer. Julian prostitutes himself to a businessman at a hotel while Clay watches. Later, Clay accompanies Julian and Finn to a party, where Julian is required to prostitute himself again. When Julian becomes upset and does not want to do what Finn has required, Finn is physically abusive and Julian caves in to his demands.

Muriel

Muriel is a friend in Clay's social circle who is a heroin user. At one point, she is hospitalized for anorexia. After she is released from the hospital, her friends passively watch as she injects herself with heroin. Toward the end of the book, she has once again been hospitalized for anorexia.

The Psychiatrist

Clay's psychiatrist is completely self-absorbed, and therefore cannot really help him.

Rip

Clay describes Rip as his drug dealer. He is a cunning, shallow, amoral young man who has no concept that his kidnapping and rape of a young girl is wrong; instead, he considers it just a night's amusement.

Shandra

Shandra is the twelve-year-old girl whom Clay's friends have kidnapped, drugged, tied to a bed, and gang-raped repeatedly. Upon seeing her for the first time, Clay leaves the room and later gives a lame attempt to convince Rip what he is doing is wrong.

Trent

A male model, Trent is a friend of Clay's.

Themes

Death

Death is a central and recurring theme of the novel. Clay is preoccupied with death and images of death. Both Clay and his friends, however, seem to perceive images of death as a form of entertainment, no different from watching television. When a dead body is discovered in an alley, word is spread round and groups of youth go to look at the body as a curiosity. None of the characters, including Clay, seem to have any emotional response to death, and none of them consider contacting the police about the body.

Death becomes pure entertainment for Clay and his friends when they watch a "snuff" film, in which real people are killed before a camera. Again, Clay and his friends find these images intriguing and fascinating, and exhibit no human emotion whatsoever regarding the suffering and death of real human beings. Other images of death appear throughout the novel, such as the coyote Blair and Clay run over on the road, and Clay's description of house cats eaten by coyotes.

Family

Although family life is peripheral to Clay and his friends, it is a central theme of the story. All of the young people in the story come from extremely wealthy families, and many of their parents are employed in the Hollywood film industry. All of the parents in the story seem to be completely preoccupied with their careers and materialistic acquisitions, and are oblivious to their children. In fact, the parents in the story seem to be off traveling most of the time, and their children are never quite sure where their parents actually are. One of Clay's friends even has to read in a Hollywood industry periodical to find out where her mother is.

Just as none of Clay's friends are able to communicate with each other in any real way, so none of the parents in this story are able to communicate with their children. Clay's parents are separated, and his encounters with each of his parents are strained. They are oblivious to his state of mind, and he does not communicate with them. Even Clay's relationship to his sisters is distant and alienated: he's not quite sure how old they are, and doesn't seem to know their names.

Drug Abuse

Drug abuse is also a major theme of this novel. Clay and his friends seem to be almost constantly consuming drugs and seeking out more drugs. Clay frequently snorts cocaine and takes Valium. He and his friends often smoke marijuana and drink excessively. Although Clay never takes heroin, several of his friends do□including Muriel, who is anorexic, and Julian, who works for a pimp in order to maintain his addiction. Toward the end of the novel, Clay's friends have kidnapped, tied up, and

gang-raped the twelve-year-old girl while injecting her with heroin. The constant drug use permeates the atmosphere of Clay's social world. Like his friends, Clay is detached from the people around him and often confused by conversations. Clay's parents are unconcerned with his drug use, as indicated when he discusses cocaine use with his sisters in front of their mother and she makes no comment about it.

Voyeurism

Voyeurism is the desire to take pleasure through detached observation and is a central theme of the novel. The most obvious instrument of voyeurism is television, usually in the form of MTV music videos, and video pornography. Through voyeurism, Clay and his friends remain detached from the world around them, and regard the death and suffering of others as merely forms of entertainment. Clay indulges himself in voyeurism when he accompanies his friend Julian when Julian prostitutes himself to a businessman in a hotel room. Clay goes along with Julian, merely to watch, because he needs to see how lowly and pathetic Julian has become.

Style

Narration

This story is narrated from the first-person point of view, meaning that the story is narrated from Clay's perspective and is limited to his thoughts and impressions of the action around him. Many critics have noted that Clay maintains a detached sense of irony in his narrative perspective. This detached tone is in part indicative of Clay's nearly constant drug use, and in part an expression of his complete sense of alienation from his own feelings, as well as from any real emotional contact with his friends and family.

Flashback Sequences

The novel is set during Clay's Christmas vacation from college. Yet interspersed with this central narrative flow of events are flashbacks to events from Clay's childhood. The flashbacks are scripted in italic type in order to set them off from the central narrative and indicate a shift in the narrative mode. Although nothing in the story directly indicates that Clay has written anything at all, the flashback sequences have a tone that suggests a personal essay or creative writing assignment for a college course.

The flashback sequences have a slightly different tone from the central narrative; they describe memories involving family interactions with relatives such as his grandparents and aunt and are less emotionally detached than the narration of the central story. Clay's memories of earlier times as described in the flashback sequences suggest a time in his life when he was more emotionally expressive and less disaffected from his family and the world around him. In the first flashback sequence, for example, Clay describes one day during his senior year of high school when he drove out to Palm Springs where the house in which he had grown up stood run-down and unoccupied. He ends the sequence by explaining that, "I guess I went out there because I wanted to remember the way things were."

Setting

This novel is set in Los Angeles during the early 1980s. This setting is crucial to the story in several ways. Clay describes a social milieu of financially over privileged teens who drive around in BMWs purchased by their parents, and spend countless sums of money on expensive drugs like cocaine. Ellis's novel depicts a spiritually and emotionally empty materialism of both the children and the parents in this milieu. Clay's father, for instance, is more concerned with his new car than with his own son.

The setting in LA is also important because many of Clay's friends are the children of people who work in the Hollywood film industry. The careers of the parents take them away from home much of the time, traveling to various locations for film production. Furthermore, the backdrop of the Hollywood film industry echoes a central theme of the

novel, which describes a world of voyeuristic entertainment devoid of any real human contact.

Historical Context

Popular Music of the 1980s

Ellis's fiction has been noted for its many references to elements of popular American culture. This novel makes references to a number of pop musicians and bands of the early 1980s, including: Elvis Costello, the Go-Gos, Peter Gabriel, Duran Duran, INXS, Adam Ant, Sting, XTC, U2, the Fleshtones, Aerosmith, Squeeze, the Clash, the Eagles, and Fleetwood Mac. These references appear on posters and T-shirts as well as in discussion of new albums and songs, and background noise in various scenes of the novel. These references are partly what lead critics to call the novel "the voice of a new generation," as they locate the characters in a very specific historical and generational milieu of popular entertainment.

Popular Film, Television, and Magazines

Reference is also made to various movies, such as *Friday the 13th, Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and*Temple of Doom.* Several references to television programs also appear in the novel, such as *The Twilight Zone,* a science fiction series, and *Another World,* a long-running soap opera. The titles also pick up on central themes of the novel. *Friday the 13th* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* are both classic horror films; their association with graphic violence, and the voyeuristic pleasures of watching graphic violence, are recurring interests of Clay and his friends. Popular magazines also figure prominently in Clay's social world of consumerism and glamour, including: *International Male, GQ,* and *Glamour.* These pop culture references together echo the book's theme of a shallow, superficial world built on the pleasures of voyeurism and consumerism.

MTV/HBO, and Betamax

Part of what makes this novel "the voice of a new generation" is the many references to newly marketed home video technology that became widely used in the early 1980s. Central to the atmosphere of the story is that televisions are often turned on to the MTV (Music TeleVision) station, featuring pop music videos. While music had been set to video or film images for promotional purposes before 1980, music videos did not become readily accessible to the public until the launching of MTV in 1981.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry on "Music Video" has captured the stylistic flavor of music videos in the early MTV era, when performance clips had been all but superseded by a conceptual approach whose characteristic surrealism was often more stipulated than invented and whose glib stylistic hallmarks quickly became cliches: associative editing, multiple dramatized situations chosen more for their visual impact than their appropriateness, an air of significance undeterred by lack of actual meaning, and a breathtaking readiness to refer to, pilfer, and rework the 20th century's vast trove of talismanic imagery□drawn from movies, TV, painting, news photography, and so on.

MTV programming was made possible by the newly developed availability of cable television in the mid-1970s, which offered subscribers countless additional TV channels from which to choose. Characters in the novel also watch HBO (Home Box Office), a major cable station founded in 1972 by Time, Inc. In addition, characters in the novel watch videos, most often pornography, on the "betamax." The Betamax was an early version of videocassette recorder (VCR), launched by Sony in the 1970s. VHS soon dominated the market, and Betamax faded out of popularity.

Critical Overview

Ellis's first novel, *Less Than Zero* (1985), began as an assignment for a creative writing course. Upon its publication, he was both praised for his ability to capture the voice of a young generation and criticized for the novel's ambivalent sense of morality. The novel was noted for many reference to many elements of popular culture, particularly pop music. According to Peter Freese:

The reviews of Ellis's first novel were extremely mixed. While one group of critics expressed their outraged rejection of the book's juvenile sensationalism, another group celebrated the novel as "a weirdly fascinating book" and greeted it as the authentic literary expression of a new generation.

Nonetheless, Freese contends: "However drastically the critical estimations diverged, two statements were frequently repeated: *Less Than Zero* was understood as *The Catcher in the Rye* updated for the eighties, and the slim book was classified as an 'MTV novel.'"

Freese gives a positive assessment of the novel's success as "the voice of a new generation":

Less Than Zero is not only an expressive cultural document but also an accomplished narrative. It authentically expresses the lifestyle of a generation nourished on the ubiquitous products of a sensation-bent entertainment industry, a generation in love with the violent and rebellious music of rock and punk, conversant with the escapist underground culture of drugs, abandoned by their pleasure-hunting, success-oriented and irresponsible parents, and haunted by a sense of impending doom.

Freese explains the title is derived from an Elvis Costello song, as indicating that "All they finally manage to effect is their physical and psychological self-destruction through drugs and prostitution, and thus it turns out that although they appear to have everything, they really have 'less than zero.'"

David Pan describes the MTV-style narrative of Ellis's novel, and its significance to the characterization of Clay, the novel's narrator and protagonist:

The indifferent flow of images and events resembles the stream of flat images seen on television. Ellis' prose shares television's drive to continually change the image, to relentlessly keep up the pace of the action, a drive that ultimately debases the image and trivializes the action. Clay's own identity and consciousness is replaced by the string of events which, like the video images before his eyes, he seems to have no control over, and which in the end perhaps entertain for a while, but can never really satisfy.

Freese, on the other hand, evaluates the significance of the success of Ellis's narrative style as a meaningful novelistic strategy, although he maintains that it "is no 'MTV novel.'":

it is a tale which manages to translate the fast-paced urgency, the total lack of historical awareness, the additive impact and the macabre glitter of musical television into narrative strategies which deserve to be taken seriously as expressions of contemporary lifestyle and indications of future literary developments.

Some critics of Ellis's novel point to the passive, amoral stance of the narrator toward the events that surround him as a major weakness in the novel; others maintain that "the ironic tone" of the narrator "is unmistakable," and that this ironic distance provides a critical social perspective.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Tabitha McIntosh-Byrd is an English literature instructor at the University of Pennsylvania. In the following essay she discusses the commodification of images and desire in Bret Easton Ellis's Less Than Zero.

In Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin,* the central character defines himself as a passive observer of prewar Germany by using the words, "I am a camera with its shutter open." Like the narrator of that tale, *Less Than Zero's* narrator, Clay, positions himself as a detached observer of Los Angeles life. He and his peers are "cameras with their shutters open"□dispassionate commentators of what they see. His episodic visits to his psychiatrist bring no emotional insight, since the psychiatrist is as limited to external observation as his clients are. Rather, Clay describes a self and a world that contains no interiority□no experience or sense of itself beyond accessible surfaces. The camera view is symbiotic with its viewed object, so that Clay is both seen and seeing; object and subject at the same time. This disassociation of internal and external reality reaches greater and greater levels of psychosis as the novel develops, in a progressive move from icon to attitude to image to embodiment. The social postures of Julian, Trent, and Clay's sisters are inspired by the camera's icons, then converted into images□pornography, photography and film□and finally reified in flesh. In this way, the image (MTV, pornography) is turned into a physical practice (prostitution, torture) that carries with it the detached externality of the icon that preceded it, caused it and determined its form.

The importance and hyper-proliferation of images in the novel can be best explicated through the concept of "commodity fetishism." In "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret," Marx suggests that commodity products become part of an obfuscating network of symbols that obscure the history of labor that went into their production. The "labor" at issue in *Less Than Zero* is the process of being□the act of being a living subject whose photograph can be taken, and converted into a commodity (object). In this way, images as marketed, reproduced, and reproducing commodities first obscure, and then replace the human subjects who create them. MTV, the movie industry, and fashion photography are iconic symbols that obscure their own mode of production, making the conventions and viewing models of the camera appear naturalistic.

The narrative style of *Less Than Zero* replicates these viewing models, structuring itself as a detached/observational series of jump cuts, image montages, aspect to aspect transitions, and flashbacks. This internalization of film convention is referred to explicitly as well as metatextually. At Blair's father's party, for example, Clay talks to a film student about a recent movie, asking, "Didn't it bother you the way they kept dropping characters out of the film for no reason at all?" The student replies, "Kind of, but that happens in real life." Thus, the cinematic narrative style of character development and cast have fed-back onto perceived reality, reshaping it in their own form.

Like this film student whose sense of "real life" is predicated on the continuity conventions of movies, everything in Clay's life is tainted by the camera□by the film

industry, by the commodification of images, and by the facile surface level of self-representation that both demand. This relationship is indicated by the initial description of his Los Angeles bedroom. The central focus of the room, at which Clay looks "with caution," is a framed poster that hangs on the wall above the bed. Critically, the poster/image is positioned both an object for viewing, as well as an active observer in and of itself:

It's the promotional poster for an old Elvis Costello record. Elvis looks past me, with this wry ironic smile on his lips, staring out the window . . . The eyes don't look at me ... They only look at whoever's standing by the window.

As he later makes clear, Clay is in the habit of going to the window so that he can be "seen" by the poster. What he does not say is even more important□that one can never be "viewed" by an image like this: its line of vision is *always* directed away from the observer.

Thus the poster is serving multiple symbolic and metaphoric functions within the novel. On the most basic level, this is a "promotional poster"□a piece of marketing ephemera that has been elevated to the status of art. In essence, Clay is decorating his life with advertising□a literalization of the media intensive atmosphere in which he moves. At the same time, the image shapes his actions and desires□forcing him to reorganize his placement within *its* field of vision in order to be seen. His uneasy positioning, repositioning, and self-abasement before the wry irony of the image thus acts as a powerful metaphor for his antagonistic and desiring relationship with the image driven world of wealthy Los Angeles.

In critical scenes, Clay's response to emotions is to externalize his perspective□to adopt a view of himself that mirrors this uneasy attempt to be the subject of his poster's vision. When Blair tries to talk about their relationship, for example, his reaction is to sort through a series of photographs of himself. The "self" whom Blair loves and the self to whom she addresses her "self," is thus entirely displaced□the image held up instead in a protective/deflective act. His critical insights are gleaned from billboards, posters and television; these are icons that he views, and that "view him back," shaping the way he thinks.

In a series of dizzying juxtapositions, Clay shifts from being the camera's object to being the camera itself: the viewed and the viewer. As viewed object he relays a nightmarish party at which a photographer is present and anorexic Muriel shoots drugs. This montage of disconnected images is linked with the phrase: "The photographer takes a picture." As viewer, Clay keeps his "shutters open" during Julian's debasement, saying "I want to see the worst." As he watches, his narrative brings together the repeated phrases that thread the novel together:

The man rolls Julian over. *Wonder if he 'sfor sale.* I don't close my eyes. You can disappear here without knowing it.

"Disappear Here" is the message on a billboard that Clay passes early in the novel. By introducing it at this point, Julian's prostitution is linked to the wider exchange base of consumer culture, and both are shown in a symbiotic relationship with the viewer. In this critical scene, then, Clay ties together the desire to view, the impact of advertising, the economic purpose of viewing, and the essentially exploitative basis of pleasure/desire. If Julian is a "fetishized" commodity, this scene uncovers the intellectual, semiotic, and emotional labor that produced him.

Though Julian, Clay and the other male characters are thus maimed by "camera eyes," the most violent effects are reserved for female characters. The degradation of women in cinematic viewing is shown in a continuum of effect throughout the novel, a process best understood through the notion of "the gaze." Laura Mulvey's extremely influential 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," describes the image of woman in Hollywood cinema as the passive object for the active male gaze. In her analysis, this "pleasure of the male gaze" is threatened by the woman's representation as a signifier of castration. She argues that two unconscious responses alleviate this fear. The first is a process of sadistic voyeurism, which denigrates the woman, and the second is a process of "fetishistic scopophilia." Fetishistic scopophilia overvalues the woman's physical appearance, thus "controlling" her.

The female images in *Less than Zero* are layered in increasingly horrific permutations of subjection to the male gaze. Clay's nameless sisters act as the initial stage. Viewers rather than viewed objects, these girls read GQ with muted pornography playing on the television. The fashionable, viewing, and cultural forces at play here are critically different to those in Clay's domestic space. His overriding image of aspirational self□the poster□ haunts him by his inability to be seen, signifying a masculinity that always escapes self-awareness and satisfactory representation.

On the other hand, his sisters have surrounded themselves with a highly functional version of gender identity in which representations of the female are inextricable from representations of the passive female body as an eroticized object of viewing. The role of sex in advertising is made obvious in this scene by its juxtaposition with staged sex. The set of sexual images is muted in the same way that scopophilic consumer culture is metaphorically "soundless"□apparently unobtrusive, yet consistently and overwhelmingly concerned with presenting the female body for scrutiny. This "gazed upon" object of the female body to sell movies, clothes, commodities, and lifestyles means that Clay's sisters have surrounded themselves with icons totally opposed to the "wry irony" of the Costello poster. Unlike that framed icon, their model for identification is supremely accessible, both to the gaze and to the satiation of desire. The female self is reduced to a form, used as an object/commodity in both their reading and viewing matter. Pornography, fashion and advertising are tied together as scopophilic mechanisms, and, crucially, they are shown to be mechanisms that reproduce themselves.

This downward spiral of self-reproduction is indicated by the progressive destruction that is wrought upon the object of the scopophilic gaze throughout the novel. Clay's sisters are contrasted with the snuff-film victim, and then the drugged and tortured girl in

Rip's apartment. The progression demarcated is that from warping of the self through endless viewing, reviewing, enactment and reenactment of a commodified version of reality the movie camera's object as lived experience. Women shift from being the consumers of images (viewers), to being the subject of commodities (people in films), to being themselves commodifi-able forces (used to sell things), and finally to being commodities themselves (things).

The cinematic male gaze transforms the consensual actress of the sound stage into the pornographic object of desire that loops endlessly in the sisters' bedroom. In turn, this image of desired object is intensified into a more "real" version of itself the ultimate cinema verite of the snuff film. This progression of greater and greater imposition of control/gaze is finally and horribly reified in the tied body of the girl in Rip's bedroom. Drugged, shaved, voiceless and powerless, she is a reified, literalized version of the process to which the female self is subjected. As the precursor to this episode makes clear, the culture of cinema necessitates, causes, and is caused by this brutality.

Critically, Daniel's decision to stay in L.A. comes after he's been aroused by the snuff film. In a conversation with Clay, he explains what he's been thinking about: a pretty young girl who's "shot full of smack," taken to a party and "gang-banged." Clay assumes he's talking about real life. Daniel corrects him. It's a "good idea for a screenplay" and it's the reason he's not going back he's "going to write this screenplay, see?" Several pages later, he and the other male characters do just that "write this screenplay" by "gangbanging" a child.

The image of the girl on the bed is more than a symbolic stand-in for the role of women in an image-obsessed society. She also acts as the victim of a process to which all of the "once children" of Clay's world have been subjected by their culture. She acts thus both as an object on which to express desire, as well as an avatar of the Beverly Hills self a corporeal manifestation of the self-hatred, self-exploitation, and self-destruction which drives Julian, Trent, and Daniel, and which is symbolized for Clay by haunting visions of tortured and burning children on the freeways. Crucially, this destruction, self-destruction and exploitation proceeds from and is preceded by imagery. As Clay says at the close of his story:

These images stayed with me even after I left the city. Images so violent and malicious that they seemed to be my only point of reference for a long time afterwards.

Source: Tabitha McIntosh-Byrd, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Freese contemplates the narrative qualities and social commentary of Less Than Zero.

In 1985, a twenty-year-old Bennington College undergraduate named Bret Easton Ellis published a book which, as rumour has it, he had typed on his bedroom floor in about a month and which he entitled *Less Than Zero.* The young man, who had grown up in Sherman Oaks as the son of a well-to-do real estate analyst, wrote about what he seemed to know well from personal experience: the aimlessness and *angst* of rich Los Angeles youngsters in their hectic world of drugs, casual sex and violence. In a surprisingly short time his lurid tale about "the seamy underside of the preppy handbook" turned into a craze in Los Angeles and a must on many American campuses. The movie rights were secured by independent producer Marvin Worth before the novel had even appeared in the stores, and Penguin Books bought the paperback rights for $100,000. Meanwhile the film has been released, and the book is out in a fast-selling German translation. Ellis has followed his successful debut with a second novel, *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), which the blurb of the paperback edition describes as dealing with "the couplings and capitulations, the dramas and the downfalls of American college life in the 1980s" and which reads like a fictional confirmation of Allan Bloom's crushing diagnosis of contemporary student life in his controversial bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind.*

The reviews of Ellis' first novel were extremely mixed. While one group of critics expressed their outraged rejection of the book's juvenile sensationalism conveyed, as one aggravated reviewer put it, "in the inarticulate style of a petulant suburban punk," another group celebrated the novel as "a weirdly fascinating book" and greeted it as the authentic literary expression of a new generation. However drastically the critical estimations diverged, two statements were frequently repeated: *Less Than Zero* was understood as *The Catcher in the Rye* updated for the eighties, and the slim book was classified as an 'MTV novel.'

Whereas the first argument can be easily disproved□Ellis' protagonist is definitely no new Holden Caulfield but rather a latter-day male Sally Hayes□the second argument raises some intriguing questions. Has the ubiquitous mass medium of Music Television with its incessant flow of video clips, its devotion to glittering surfaces, its limitation to the immediate present, and the reduction of its 'stories' to the short attention span of contemporary youth really found its verbal equivalent in a new narrative style? Is it feasible to say that "you don't so much read *[Less Than Zero]* as you watch and listen to it unfold"? and is "reading it [...] like watching MTV"? Has the young debutante actually managed to develop a new narrative voice geared to the lifestyle and the experiential reality of a particular segment of today's young generation?

Since so far no critic has subjected the supposedly ephemeral novel to the close scrutiny necessary to either confirm or disprove the trendy phrases of hurried reviewers, these questions remain as yet unanswered. And they are difficult to answer because the

referential context within which Ellis' novel unfolds combines the hero worship, fashion cults and behavioral codes of a rapidly changing youth culture with the hermetic habits and expressions of an underground drug scene. Consequently, the traditional literary critic has a hard time unravelling the significance of rock lyrics and behavioral or conversational gambits which do not belong to his cultural code and he is too easily tempted to dismiss the laconically understated first-person narration of Ellis' protagonist as just another example of pervasive triviality and cultural decay. Quite obviously, *Less Than Zero* is no masterpiece, but, apart from its significance as a cultural document, it deserves closer scrutiny as a narrative which is more artfully structured than a first reading reveals.

"Where are we going?" I asked. "I don't know," he said. "Just driving." "But this road doesn't go anywhere," I told him. "That doesn't matter." "What does?" I asked, after a little while. "Just that we're on it, dude," he said.

The action of *Less Than Zero* can be easily summarized: Clay, an eighteen-year-old freshman, comes back from his first term at a college in New Hampshire to spend his Christmas vacation with his broken-up wealthy family in Los Angeles. During the month he stays in his hometown, he whiles away his time at endless parties and in fashionable restaurants and nightspots, sleeps indiscriminately with the boys and girls that belong to his over-privileged set of bored adolescents, constantly drinks and smokes, sniffs cocaine to get high and takes Valium to come down again, aimlessly drives around sprawling Los Angeles in his expensive car, mindlessly watches television, listens to pop songs on the ubiquitous stereos, and plays senseless games in video arcades. In between he visits his fashionable psychiatrist, who cannot help him, and tries to avoid contact with his parents, with whom he cannot communicate. Clay's frantic search for cheap thrills leads to nothing but boredom and a pervasive sense of anomie and desperation.

Clay's aimless meandering between beach houses in Malibu and extravagant villas in the Hollywood Hills, guarded mansions in Bel Air and expensive bungalows in Palm Springs conveys an image of a world which is characterized by frantic hedonism and pathetic futility. The interchangeable members of his clique turn out to be alienated youths who have nothing to look forward to because they know and own everything. They take their Porsches, BMWs and Mercedes for granted, assume that it is their natural right to go to the most expensive colleges and universities, and have tried every sexual variation and experimented with every available drug. These boys and girls, whose lives revolve around the newest fads, who talk about the state of their suntan with the intensity of theologians discussing God, and whose cultural horizon is confined to current pop songs and movies, are deprived of the stability provided by functioning families. Their parents, divorced or separated, occupied by their passing affairs, intent on their success in the Hollywood industry, and obsessed by their futile attempts at preserving eternal youth, have no time for and no interest in their children, have never provided them with a functioning value system, and try to absolve themselves of their responsibility by generously writing cheques. Consequently, their children enjoy every privilege money can buy, but their anarchic liberty is tainted by rootlessness and the complete absence of any sense of belonging. For all the young drifters contact with their

dealer is much more important than any other relationship. Human decency and care are unknown factors in this world of drug-induced euphoria, and the ever-changing partners for both hetero-and homosexual sex are either shown off as status symbols or simply used as objects of instant gratification.

The young men and women with their well-tanned bodies and stylish clothes pretend to themselves and others that they are rebels against the money-orientated life of their parents. But they are rebels without a cause, who shy away from bodily labour, intellectual exertion and emotional commitment alike and who act out their phony rebellion by spending the money of those they pretend to despise. All they finally manage to effect is their physical and psychological self-destruction through drugs and prostitution, and thus it turns out that although they appear to have everything, they really have "less than zero."

Clay's dealer Rip, for example, who had earlier complained that "there's not a whole lot to do anymore", tries to get some new 'kick' by drugging and sexually abusing a twelve-year-old girl in the most sadistic fashion. When Clay halfheartedly remonstrates that this is not right, Rip states, "If you want something, you have the right to take it. If you want to do something, you have the right to do it"; he dismisses Clay's objection that he has everything with the plaintive assertion: "I don't have anything to lose". Young Alana, who has just gone through an abortion, knowledgeably confides in Clay, "I think we've all lost some sort of feeling". Lindsay reports to his exhilarated peers "how he hasn't met anyone for the past four months who's over nineteen", and Kim tells Clay that she had thought her mother was in England but she recently read in *Variety* that she is actually in Hawaii. Julian, the spoilt youngster with his expensive Porsche who peddles drugs to children to finance his costly habit, ambiguously observes, "I'm just so sick of dealing with people", and Clay, after looking for new records in a well-stocked store, comes to the realization, "I don't find anything I want that I don't already have".

These statements illustrate a lifestyle which is both repellent and pitiable. They demonstrate that, as a cultural document about the consequences of affluence and permissiveness, the ceaseless search for success and the influence of sensation-seeking mass media, *Less Than Zero* is a frightening admission of social failure. To cultural critics of shirt-sleeved free enterprise the novel offers devastating proof of their charges, and it strikingly illustrates Neil Postman's thesis that we are amusing ourselves to death in our mendacious age of show business.

"The young Americans [. . .] have abandoned all concealment; and when they are most themselves, nearest to their central concerns, turn frankly to Pop forms□[. . .] they choose the genre most associated with exploitation by the mass media: notably, the Western, Science Fiction and Pornography."

(Leslie Fiedler, "Cross the Border□Close That Gap: Post-Modernism")

Considered as a 'literary' text, Ellis' novel appears to be a rather artless tale, which makes use of the genuinely American tradition of vernacular first-person narration, employs the elementary story line of a chronological sequence of events in the form of a

loosely structured urban picaresque, and limits itself to a simple concatenation of brief narrative passages and extended dialogues rendered in direct speech. The reader's initial impression of formlessness and contingency is underscored by the fact that the 208 pages of the novel are divided into 108 very short chapters with an average length of less than two pages. These chapters are obviously geared to the limited attention span of both the drug-impaired narrator himself and the readers he addresses. Each chapter presents a self-sufficient slice-of-life, a short 'take,' as it were, defined in space and time and unfolding as a visible action, with the available 'actions' limited to partying,

watching television, driving around, taking drugs, having sex, eating out, and talking at cross purposes. The chapters often switch abruptly from one place and time of action to another, and as it is up to the reader to connect them, they provide the necessary orientation by opening with exact temporal and/or spatial pointers like "it's two in the morning and hot and we're at the Edge" or "I'm sitting in my psychiatrist's office the next day". Thus the outward pattern of the novel might well be compared to the rapid sequence of video clips as they abruptly and unceasingly follow each other on Music Television.

Behind the artless surface of Clay's fast-paced tale, however, lies a structure that provides the novel with some unexpected coherence and additional meaning. Ellis makes his eighteen-year-old protagonist tell his story in the present tense. This strategy is meant to enhance the immediacy and confessional urgency of Clay's tale. While it certainly achieves the desired effect, it necessarily deprives the story of historical depth and disconnects Clay's frantic present from the past which alone could help to explain it. Such a lack of continuity characterizes the hedonistic existence of all the novel's actors with their hectic search for instant gratification, and thus Ellis' choice of narrative tense turns out to be an appropriate formal correlative of his *sujet.* But obviously Ellis knows that a novel is supposed to deal with life in its developmental unfolding, and he achieves at least some semblance of temporal depth by presenting 12 of his 108 chapters as 'memory' chapters which deal with selected aspects of Clay's earlier life. In deference to the uninitiated reader, these chapters, which necessarily use the past tense, are printed in italics and thus made immediately recognizable as 'inserts' providing some explanatory material which the reader has to relate to the present state of affairs. These chapters also announce their function by opening with temporal pointers like "during the end of my senior year" or "last summer". They deal with "the way things were" and thereby conjure up some vague image of a time when the family was still intact□with the grandparents alive, the parents not yet separated, and Clay's love affair with Blair still flourishing. But the 'memory' chapters are already suffused with ominous signs and intimations of bad things to come. They thus serve the double function of providing a foil against which to understand Clay's present malaise and of offering some tentative explanation why an erstwhile happy youth has turned into a passive wreck haunted by disorientation, anxiety and despair.

While the outwardly unstructured sequence of chapters in the present tense turns out to be the appropriate formal equivalent of the fact that in spite of all the actors' hectic activities nothing significant can happen in their lives, the twelve interspersed 'memory' chapters in the past tense suggest a historical dimension and introduce a

developmental aspect into the novel. Of course, this rather superficial attempt at a point-and-counter-point structure is hardly a great achievement, but it points to a group of structural strategies which are meant to translate a sequence of chapters merely added to one another into a causally unfolding whole and which therefore deserve a detailed investigation.

On closer scrutiny, the dizzying spiral of Clay's desperate search for pleasure and diversion in the metropolitan purgatory of *ennui* and *angst* reveals some inner logic. This logic depends on the two strands of the novel's kaleidoscopic action which are concerned with the gradual breakup of Clay's relationship with his girlfriend Blair and with his witnessing the development of his erstwhile school friend Julian into a drug addict and male prostitute. The loss of the only person Clay felt close to and the frightening decline of his best friend constitute the two strands which dominate the action of the novel. Although these strands are often interrupted and superseded by other events, they provide the threads which keep the action together and give the four weeks of Clay's life to which *Less Than Zero* is limited some coherence and meaning. Thus, it is no accident that at the very beginning of the novel Clay is picked up at LAX by Blair and that the first thing he finds in his room is a message from Julian asking him to phone back. And thus it is equally logical that the last conversation he has before leaving is his 'final' talk with Blair and that the last important event during his holiday is his witnessing of Julian's degradation.

Since it would go against the grimly 'cool' attitude sported by Clay and his group to discuss personal problems in detail and to show true feelings openly, the ritualistically understated verbal and gestural delivery of both the narrator and the novel's actors prevents the real issues of the book from being expressed directly. Consequently, the reader has to proceed on mere hints and oblique clues. It is against this background that Ellis artfully employs a set of iterative images and muted references to make his point. Here again an analogy to the video clips of MTV and the patterns of rock lyrics proves helpful, because these iterative images work like the refrains of songs and convey their messages through repetition and variation.

The opening sentence of the novel□"People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles"□ an observation made by Blair which "stays in [Clay's] mind for an uncomfortably long time" and occupies him for reasons he cannot name, is an outstanding example of Ellis' associative technique. Given a prominent position at the very beginning of the novel, the sentence is soon repeated verbatim and then taken up again with "on freeways in Los Angeles" left out. Thus, right at the beginning, the conversational remark about people's behavior in traffic turns into a general comment on the human situation□"people are afraid to merge"□and thereby assumes a more general significance. When Blair drops Clay at his house, "nobody's home": his mother and sisters have gone shopping instead of waiting for him on his first return from an eastern college. They are "afraid to merge," and when Clay goes to his room in the empty house, it is small wonder that he "still can hear that people are afraid to merge and tr[ies] to get over the sentence, blank it out".

Seven short chapters later, Clay is returning from a shopping trip with his mother and sisters and listening to their gossip. Talking about a young man, they mention that his house is for sale, and the older sister nastily remarks, "I wonder if he's for sale". For the moment, this is just a passing slanderous remark, but two chapters later Clay, sitting in a restaurant, feels he is being stared at by a stranger and comments, "all I can think is either he doesn't see me or I'm not here. I don't know why I think that. People are afraid to merge. *Wonder if he's for sale".* Here two hitherto unrelated observations are brought together and suddenly acquire a new meaning. The general comment about people's fear to communicate and the nasty quip about a young man's sexual availability for money are applied to a stranger whose insistent stare Clay interprets as an attempt to make a pass at him. In connection these statements render the insight that people might try to buy sexual contact unencumbered by personal commitment for the very reason that they are afraid to 'merge.' Two chapters later, Clay stops at a traffic light on Sunset Boulevard and sees a billboard. "All it says is 'Disappear Here' and even though it's probably an ad for some resort, it still freaks me out a little". In the context established so far, the slogan 'Disappear Here' can be understood as referring back to Clay's observation under the gaze of the staring stranger that possibly "I'm not here", and while the link is yet rather tentative, it soon becomes obvious.

A few days later, a sleepless Clay thinks "about the billboard on Sunset and the way Julian looked past me at Cafe Casino". By now he has not only heard nasty comments about Julian's state but has also met him without being able to find out from his strangely reluctant friend what his message had been about. He has deduced from Julian's behaviour and his way of avoiding eye-contact that his unrevealed problems might have to do with his drug addiction and that he might already be selling himself to acquire the money for his habit. The probability of such a development□and this is another of Ellis' strategies□is obliquely insinuated when Julian tells Clay that he has been to a Tom Petty concert and heard him sing a former favourite song of theirs□*"Straight into darkness, we went straight into darkness, out over that line".*

Thus, the different and initially unrelated images can begin to coalesce when Clay spends Christmas Eve with his embarrassed parents in an expensive restaurant. Bored by the phony familiarity of the two strangers claiming to be his parents and "semistoned" on cocaine, he falls into an associative reverie: "I think about Blair alone in her bed stroking that stupid black cat and the billboard that says 'Disappear Here' and Julian's eyes and wonder if he's for sale and people are afraid to merge". Here, then, Clay thinks about his former girlfriend Blair with whom he would like to 'merge,' and about Julian who might be "for sale," that is, willing to 'merge' for money because he has gone "straight into darkness," crossed "that line" of drug addiction and therefore is well on his way towards 'disappearing here.'

A few days later, Clay is lying listlessly on the beach and staring "out at the expanse of sand that meets the water, where the land ends. Disappear here". By now the clever advertising slogan has assumed crucial significance and turned into an obsessive concern for Clay. And when one relates the young man's unhappy stare into nothingness to one of the mottos of the novel, a quotation from a Led Zeppelin song that reads "There's a feeling I get when I look to the West. . . ," the extent of Clay's

hopelessness becomes painfully obvious. Walt Whitman, "facing west from California's shores," could still seek "what is yet unfound" and speculate about "the circle almost circled"; a century later the heroine of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49,* a novel about the Californian subcultures of the sixties, was sustained by her belief in "some

principle of the sea as redemption for Southern California" in spite of her recognition that the American Dream had turned into a nightmare. For Clay, however, the traditional promise of westward expansion has completely evaporated. Having substituted the last, the inner frontier to be reached only on drug-induced 'trips,' for the vanished frontier of the West, all he can see is an "expanse of sand that meets the water" and all he can think of is "Disappear Here".

After the combination of 'disappearing' and being 'for sale' has been mentioned once more and is thus kept alive even for the undiscerning reader, the cluster of images gains its final impact in the two crucial scenes which deal with Julian's downfall. Driven by his "need to see the worst", Clay accompanies his friend to a hotel to watch a stranger make love to Julian: "The man rolls Julian over. *Wonder if he 'sfor sale.* I don't close my eyes. You can disappear here without knowing it". This is the ultimate degradation brought about by the need for drugs. Julian's 'disappearing' into the abyss of sexual exploitation, his self-betrayal through prostitution and the loss of his human dignity graphically illustrate what happens when one goes *"straight into darkness, out over that line* ". A little later on the same day, Julian makes a final and desperate attempt to rebel against his drug-dealing pimp. But cynical Finn, on whose desk stands "this glass paperweight with a small fish trapped in it, its eyes staring out helplessly", knows his power and easily quenches his employee's rebellion by giving him an injection: "Disappear Here. The syringe fills with blood. [. . .] Wonder if he's for sale. People are afraid to merge. To merge". By now the three originally unrelated phrases about disappearing, being for sale and fearing to merge have acquired manifold meanings through repetition and variation within different contexts. By simply combining them Clay can express his terror and despair about the hopelessness of a self-destructive generation suffocating on the terrible combination of spiritual poverty and material abundance.

But this does not end Ellis' artful manipulation of his few simple but effective images. When Clay meets Blair for a last time before his return to the East, their meeting takes place in a restaurant on Sunset. And while Blair takes her former boyfriend to account for his negligent behavior, "I look at her, waiting for her to go on, looking up at the billboard. Disappear Here". On the surface, Clay will soon follow the injunction of the advertising slogan and 'disappear'□"After I left" are the final words of the novel□but on a metaphorical level he has 'left' long ago by withdrawing into the narcissistic no-man's-land of drug-induced apathy and self-pity. Ellis obliquely conveys this fact by making Blair reproach her former boyfriend that "it was like you weren't there. [. . .] You were never there".

From Clay's casual comment on a stranger's stare at the beginning of the novel□"either he doesn't see me or I'm not here"□to the book's final scene in which "for one blinding moment [Clay] see[s] [him] self clearly" and the person closest to him charges him with

never being there, he has been afraid to 'merge,' has run away from the risks and problems of human companionship and 'disappeared' into the dream world of cocaine and the false security of tranquilizers. The billboard slogan, then, supposedly advertising "some resort," proves true in an unexpected way. Functioning like the refrain of a pop song to which some new meaning accrues after every stanza, it sums up the cowardly retreat of Clay and his clique into the escape world of drugs and 'kicks,' their withdrawal from a socially useful and fulfilled existence into "some resort" of their sick imagination. It proves a highly effective strategy of providing the understated and scarcely verbalized problems of the rather incoherent narrator and his peers with some deeper meaning.

Another variation of the point-and-counter-point strategy is Ellis' use of a background of ominous signs and catastrophes serving as a foil against which to evaluate the hectic foreground activities of Clay and his friends. Coming home, the first thing Clay sees are some workmen "lifting the remains of palm trees that have fallen during the winds". This is an early and as yet inconspicuous reminder of the ubiquity of death and decay, which is taken up when Clay reminisces about the old house in Palm Springs as full of "empty beer cans that were scattered all over the dead lawn and the windows that were all smashed and broken". In the nocturnal silence of the Hollywood hills Clay can "hear the sound of coyotes howling and dogs barking and palm trees shaking in the wind up in the hills". Time and again there are passing references to the "damage the storm caused", the sudden torrential rains that wash houses down, the fact that cats cannot be let out at night because "there's a chance that the coyotes will eat them", or someone finding "a rattlesnake floating" in his swimming pool. Nature cannot be domesticated and will lash back at the thoughtless humans who exploit and ruin it. An earthquake is the most obvious reminder of the fact that Los Angeles is situated on the San Andreas Fault and that the pleasure-seeking activities of its rich denizens are a dance on the volcano.

But society is also in a state of threatening unrest and imbalance. When Clay and Rip have a talk about the quality of their suntans, "an old woman, holding an umbrella, falls to her knees on the other side of the street". On their way to yet another party, the young drifters "pass a poor woman with dirty, wild hair and a Bullock's bag sitting by her side full of yellowed newspapers. She's squatting on a sidewalk by the freeway"□by the freeway, that is, on which people are afraid to 'merge.' When the clique goes to the City Cafe, "there's an old man in ragged clothing and an old black hat on, talking to himself, standing in front and when we pull up, he scowls at us". Shopping-bag ladies, loitering bums and elderly people breaking down in the streets are a constant reminder of poverty and misery, pain and illness; and throughout the novel one hears ambulances passing by and police sirens howling in the distance.

Clay remembers driving around Palm Springs and coming upon "a Toyota parked at this strange, crooked angle, its hood open, flames pouring out of the engine," and for a long time he has "these visions of a child, not yet dead, lying across the flames, burning". This is when he starts collecting newspaper clippings about violent accidents, sadistic cruelties, and brutal crimes. He collects "a lot of clippings [. . .] because, I guess, there were a lot to be collected". This aspect of a society driven by violence and brutality is obvious in the novel. The pornographic activities of Clay's clique find their equivalent in

the daily crime statistics of Los Angeles. When Clay buys some magazines, "the checkout clerk is talking about murder statistics"; when the family comes home from their expensive Christmas dinner, "on Little Santa Monica, a car lays overturned, its windows broken"; when Rip and Clay drive along winding Mulholland, Rip gleefully points out "the number of wrecked cars at the bottom of the hill"; and before Clay leaves his hometown, he coolly enumerates the following incidents:

Before I left, a woman had her throat slit and was thrown from a moving car in Venice; a series of fires raged out of control in Chatsworth, the work of an arsonist; a man in Encino killed his wife and two children. Four teenagers, none of whom I knew, died in a car accident on

Pacific Coast Highway.

All through the novel, then, there are constant reminders of natural catastrophes and disasters, of violent crimes and terrible accidents, of old age, illness and death. They conjure up the general state of a society divided into the obscenely rich and the unspeakably poor and provide the overall background against which the hedonistic dance of pleasure and withdrawal of Clay and his clique has to be seen.

"For Los Angeles, more than any other city, belongs to the mass media. What is known around the nation as the L.A. Scene exists chiefly as images on a screen or TV tube, as four-color magazine photos, as old radio jokes, as new songs that survive only a matter of weeks."

(Thomas Pynchon, "A Journey Into the Mind of Watts")

Of crucial importance to a better understanding of the youngsters' thoughtlessness and inconsideration, their ruthless pursuit of pleasure, and their violence and inhumanity is the formative influence exerted upon them by the ubiquitous mass media devoted to the lurid, the sensational, the gruesome and the horrible in their cynical attempt to reach a surfeited audience. As early as 1961, Philip Roth observed that "the American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality" and complained that "the actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and [that] the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist." A few years later Bruce Jay Friedman spoke of "a fading line between fantasy and reality," stated that *The New York Times* with its daily reports on the most unbelievable events had become "the source and fountain and bible of black humour," and concluded that a writer who wanted to reach a "surprise-proof generation" needed to use a "new, one-foot-in-the-asylum style of fiction" to catch the attention of his audience.

These observations certainly apply to *Less Than Zero,* and whoever thinks that Ellis' novel is given to undue exaggerations just needs to read the *Los Angeles Times* to learn better. The list of drugs consumed by Clay and his friends offers a faithful replica of the existing drug scene and testifies to the fact that in Hollywood "the white kid digs hallucination simply because he is conditioned to believe so much in escape, escape as

an integral part of life, because the white L.A. Scene makes accessible to him so many different forms of it." Then too, the countless references to films, television plays, video clips and pop songs conjure up an actual youth culture with its hectic media events. The general atmosphere evoked by these references is one of abandonment, revolt and brutality, even bestiality, of a vicarious release of aggression and sadistic urges through fantasies of violence and pornography, and of an all-pervasive ecstasy of doom and destruction.

Clay's thirteen-and fifteen-year-old sisters habitually watch "porno films on the Betamax". Clay buys porno magazines, and his aroused clique gleefully watch a sadistic blue movie and agree that the mutilations and castrations it shows must be "real" because somebody "paid fifteen thousand for it". Kim and Blair insist on going to a movie "about this group of young pretty sorority girls who get their throats slit and are thrown into a pool," but bored Clay watches "just the gory parts". Pornography, then, is ubiquitous: Rip's sadistic violation of a twelve-year-old girl is just his individual acting out of the media events to which he is constantly exposed; and the animalization of humans which results from this exposure is graphically illustrated when Clay says about one of the girls waiting to be admitted to a nightclub that she "stares at me and smiles, her wet lips, covered with this pink garish lipstick, part and she bares her upper teeth like she was some sort of dog or wolf, growling, about to attack".

On the car radio a group called "Killer Pussy" sings a song entitled "Teenage Enema Nurses in Bondage", and when Clay's outraged mother asks whether they have to hear this, her under-age daughters insist on listening to it. At a concert of The Grimsoles, the singers throw live rats out into the audience. One day Clay wakes up to a song entitled "Artificial Insemination", and he frequently listens to songs like "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?", "Hungry Like the Wolf" or "Tainted Love". The Clash sing about "Somebody Got Murdered"; and at a party everybody expectantly waits for the songs "Sex and Dying in High Society" and "Adult Books" to be performed. A video bootleg of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* is traded for high prices (pp. 34, 90). Other films or TV plays referred to are *Alien, The Invasion of the Body Snatchers, Beastman!, Star Raider, War of the Worlds, The Twilight Zone,* and "the new *Friday the 13th* movie". Even the video games with which Clay and his friends while away their time seem only to "deal with beetles and bees and moths and snakes and mosquitoes and frogs drowning and mad spiders eating large purple video flies [. . .] and the images are hard to shake off". Small wonder, then, that when somebody disappears in Bel Air there are hysterical speculations about "some kind of monster, [. . .] a werewolf"; that Spit, who wears "a skull earring," assures a friend, "You know I don't keep dead animals in my room anymore"; and that Rip "carries a plastic eyeball in his mouth". The unceasing onslaught of outrageous science-fiction horrors and ever more violent pornography has made people callous and insensitive. A "huge green skull leering at drivers from a billboard on Sunset, hooded, holding a pyx, bony fingers beckoning" advertises some new 'kick'; "little girls" sing about an earthquake in Los Angeles and announce *"My surfboard's ready for the tidal wave [. . .] Smack, smack, I fell in a crack [. . .] Now I'm part of the debris".* When Clay, whose first action is to switch on MTV whenever he is alone, refers in passing to "a video on cable of buildings being blown up in slow motion and in black and white", or when he enters somebody else's house and finds a girl

"watching some movie about cave men" and describes his exit by saying, "Some caveman gets thrown off a cliff and I split", the continual presence of images of violence and destruction is quite incidentally evoked as something which everybody takes for granted.

The ubiquitous presence of sensational films and videos that thrive on sadistic violence and all-encompassing destruction, on gruesome fantasies of man-animal transformations and intergalactic warfare, on outrageous sexual abuse and the thrills of a final cataclysm pervades *Less Than Zero,* and this presence becomes all the more striking as it stands in absurd contrast to such faddish accessories of wealth as Giorgio Armani sweaters and Calvin Klein jeans, Gucci loafers, Louis Vuitton luggage, and Wayfarers sunglasses. Leslie Fiedler's assertion that the new 'Pop novel' thrives on the genres most associated with exploitation by the mass media, namely the Western, Science Fiction, and Pornography, is fully borne out by Ellis' tale, which makes use of these fields not only as the 'cultural' background to its foreground action, but also as the target of its obliquely presented exposure of social grievances.

"[. . .] she thinks of the Heat Death of the Universe. A logarithmic of those late summer days, [. . .] the heat pressing, bloating, doing violence. The Los Angeles sky becomes so filled and bleached with detritus that it loses all colour and silvers like a mirror, reflecting back the fricasseeing earth. [. . .] She imagines the whole of New York City melting like a Dali into a great chocolate mass, a great soup, the Great Soup of New York."

(Pamela Zoline, "The Heat Death of the Universe")

"What it is is, most of the things we say, I guess, are mostly noise."

(Thomas Pynchon, "Entropy")

It is obvious that the manifold references to a spiritually sick culture and the illnesses it has bred in a sizeable segment of its affluent young generation create a pervasive sense of impending doom, a cataclysmic feeling of last days which Clay and his friends use as an alibi for their refusal to grow up and face reality. This sense of doom is related to the traditional notion of the Christian apocalypse when Clay starts "watching religious programs on cable TV because [he is] tired of watching videos". The first show he sees happens to be especially pertinent to his world because it presents some fervent preachers "talking about Led Zeppelin records, saying that, if they're played backwards, they 'possess alarming passages about the devil'". Again, this is no invention of Ellis' but the show depicts an actual record-burning campaign of a Pentecostal group. The programme is ironically related to the novel's action when the worried preacher declares that he will go on fighting satanic rock music since it is detrimental to youth and "the young are the future of this country". At another occasion a televangelist promises that Jesus "will come through the eye of that television screen" and thereby involuntarily reveals that even the Christian message has been commercialized and trivialized by the mass media. Clay is desperate enough to wait "for something to happen", but, of

course, nothing happens; and again it is highly ironic that all the helpless youth can remember are the preacher's words "Let this be a night of Deliverance".

The apocalyptic implications of *Less Than Zero,* however, are only of marginal importance, because Ellis' kaleidoscopic whirl of disparate 'takes' and the iterative images relating them is infused with a competing motif providing his verbal "videos [. . .] flash[ing] by" with some deeper significance. This motif is that of entropy in both its thermodynamic sense of the 'heat death' of the universe and its cybernetic sense of increasing informational attrition. One day, Clay and a friend of his meet the girl Ronnette. She tells them that she had

this dream, see, where I saw the whole world melt. I was standing on La Cienega and from there I could see the whole world and it was melting and it was just so strong and realistic like. And so I thought, Well, if this dream comes true, how can I stop it, you know?

On the surface, of course, this is just a drug-induced hallucination, but it so obviously points to the traditional motif of the 'heat death' of the universe that it becomes an indicator of some larger significance. Such an assumption is borne out by many further references. Clay remembers, for example, "last Christmas" in Palm Springs when it was so unbelievably hot that "the metal grids in the crosswalk signs were twisting, writhing, actually melting in the heat". When he witnesses a car accident, he is haunted by a vision of "a kid burning, melting, on the engine". Going out into the oppressive heat, he experiences the sun as "huge and burning, an orange monster", and on another occasion he stands on a hill, "overlooking the smog-soaked, baking Valley and feeling the hot winds returning and the dust swirling at my feet and the sun, gigantic, a ball of fire, rising over it". He reads the paper, "at twilight," and finds "a story about how a local man tried to bury himself alive in his backyard because it was 'so hot, too hot'". And when he hears a harsh and bitter song about Los Angeles, he hallucinates "images of people, teenagers my own age, looking up from the asphalt and being blinded by the sun". At the house of Finn, the pimp, he sees a young surfer dividing his attention between reading the back of a Captain Crunch cereal box and watching *The Twilight Zone* on television, and on the huge screen "Rod Serling's staring at us and tells us that we have just entered The Twilight Zone and though I don't want to believe it, it's just so surreal that I know it's true".

It is a genuine achievement of Ellis' novel that its whirl of interrelated 'clips' is so surreal that it achieves the frightening impact of authenticity and truth. It is a world in which, in a fashionable nightspot, someone has "written 'Help Me' over and over in red crayon on the table in a childish scrawl", thus revealing the amount of loneliness and despair behind the glittering facade of mindless pleasure; in which the vanity number plates of rich people's cars read "CLIMAXX" and "DECLINE", thus achieving a significance their owners are probably unaware of; and in which bathroom graffiti spell out "Gloom Rules"—such a world has already entered the 'twilight zone' of chaos and inertia, in which the available energy has been spent and the entropy of the system is moving towards a maximum. Therefore, the atmosphere which pervades *Less Than Zero* is not that of apocalypse, that is, of an impending Last Judgment which will bring both death

and rebirth, an end and a new beginning, but that of entropy with its irreversible movement towards final chaos and decay.

On the informational level, as worked out by Shannon and Brillouin, popularized by Wiener and brilliantly put to literary use by Thomas Pynchon, the concept of entropy as a gradual reduction of communicable information is also implemented in Ellis' novel. The numerous dialogues between Clay and his friends never become a real exchange of ideas or opinions. They constitute frightening examples of the speechlessness of an almost autistic generation living in a world in which true meaning has long been buried under the relentless onslaught of never-ceasing 'information.' The entropic movement from diversity to similarity, from difference to sameness is strikingly illustrated by the uniformity and interchangeability of the young people.

In Clay's circles, one of the most important prerequisites for being 'in' is the correct tan: Blair's U.S.C. friends, "all tan and blond", Blair's father's boyfriend, who is "really young and blond and tan", Clay's father, who is "completely tan and has had a hair transplant", Dimitri, who "is really tan and has short blond hair", and Clay himself, who comes back from the East looking "pale" and quickly decides that he "need[s] to work on [his] tan"□anybody who wants to be accepted has to have the correct complexion. When Clay goes to a party, he comments, "There are mostly young boys in the house and they seem to be in every room and they all look the same: thin, tan bodies, short blond hair, blank look in the blue eyes, same empty toneless voices, and then I start to wonder if I look exactly like them". Of course, he does. The similarity and interchangeability of the standardized youths is not only another indication of the failure of their phony revolt in the name of liberation from social pressures, but also the sign of a far advanced entropic movement from difference to sameness. On a deeper level, then, the frantic punk-yuppie-video hunt for instant pleasure on a volcano that can erupt any moment, under a sun which is a gigantic "ball of fire" and "an orange monster" threatening to melt the whole world, is revealed as a last desperate exertion before the final and imminent onset of maximum entropy and the appearance of the ultimate chaos of inertia.

In Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* there is a reference to "those emptying days brilliant and deep, especially at dawn, with blue shadows to seal its passage, to try to bring events to Absolute Zero," which occurs in the first book entitled "Beyond the Zero." With Pynchon one can safely assume that this is a reference to Walther Hermann Nernst's Third Law of Thermodynamics, concerning the zero entropy to be achieved at a temperature of absolute zero which, however, one cannot reach. With Ellis, however, the "Zero" appears to be just a metaphor of ultimacy indicating that the irresistible movement from distinction and differentiation to sameness and interchangeability has run its course, that an irreversible and universal 'merging' other than the desirable one of human interaction is about to occur, and that the energy necessary for survival is on the verge of 'disappearing here.'

It is in this context that the novel's title achieves its metaphorical significance, which is underscored by a fact which is not mentioned but which the youthful reader is expected to know. In his room Clay has "the promotional poster for an old Elvis Costello record [. . .] on the wall above [his] bed". This record is one of the most successful songs Costello

ever produced, namely, "Less Than Zero." The novel's title, then, is an unacknowledged quotation, and its allusion to a song by a leading representative of the British punk and new wave explosion is another indication that Ellis' referential context is not that of 'mainstream' literature but of contemporary pop culture. Costello's song refers to "Mr. Oswald with his swastika tattoo" and obliquely relates President Kennedy's assassination to general social decay by stating that "Mr Oswald said he had an understanding with the law / He said he heard about a couple living in the USA/ He said they traded in their baby for a Chevrolet." The refrain of the song reads:

Turn out the TV, No one of them will suspect it. Then your mother won't detect it, So your father won't know. They think that I got no respect, But every film means less than zero.

Costello's song, then, conjures up the very atmosphere of a world violently out of joint and drifting towards ultimate chaos, filled with the ubiquitous 'noise' of the mass media and pervaded by a desire for the release of death, which also pervades *Less Than Zero.* Consequently, the novel's title is a programmatic statement which places the book within the wider context of a youthful punk and rock revolt.

"The facts even when beaded on a chain, still did not have real order. Events did not flow. The facts were separate and haphazard and random even as they happened, episodic, broken, no smooth transitions, no sense of events unfolding from prior events."

(Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato*)

When Salinger's Holden Caulfield declared his rebellion against a "phony" adult world in the name of the few things he considered "nice," his position constituted a psychologically believable stance in spite of his adolescent obfuscation. This is why a whole young generation could identify with him and venerate him as their spokesman. With Ellis' Clay, however, the situation is different. Paul Gray was certainly right when he observed in his *Time* review that Ellis' "efforts to distance Clay, the narrator, from all the other zombies is unsuccessful" and that "ultimately, Ellis' novel is anchored to a hero who stands for nothing." Clay is bound to remain an unconvincing character because his creator's choice of the present tense deprives him of historical depth and results in a complete lack of narrative distance between Clay's behavior as 'experiencing F and his stance as 'narrative I.' Moreover, there is a disturbing tension between his languidly understated, indifferent and drug-impaired registering of his and his clique's meaningless life on the one hand and the rare instances in which he achieves the distance necessary for meaningful narration on the other. Admittedly, he has, rather inexplicably, mustered enough energy to leave his group and attempt a new beginning at an eastern college, he is content with 'only' sniffing cocaine and has not yet "mainlined"; he chides Rip for his sadistic behavior, cannot stand the pornographic movie to its cruel end, and rejects the invitation to rape the drugged girl. His recurring crying fits are obviously meant to indicate that he is conscious of his malaise, and in the end he knows that "it was time to go back. I had been home a long time". But the tension between his unprepared assertions of self-recognition□"the sun bursts into my

eyes and for one blinding moment I see myself clearly"□ and his immediately adjacent expressions of indifference and inertia□"Nothing makes me happy. I like nothing"□remains unresolved, and he never assumes the stature of a rounded personality.

Such shortcomings are typical of a first novel and are the necessary corollaries of the narrative perspective chosen by Ellis. Nevertheless, *Less Than Zero* is not only an expressive cultural document but also an accomplished narrative. It authentically expresses the lifestyle of a generation nourished on the ubiquitous products of a sensation-bent entertainment industry, a generation in love with the violent and rebellious music of rock and punk, conversant with the escapist underground culture of drugs, abandoned by their pleasure-hunting, success-orientated and irresponsible parents, and haunted by a sense of impending doom. *Less Than Zero,* then, is no *Catcher in the Rye* of the eighties. But the unwarranted comparison can alert us to the enormous and frightening changes that have occurred in the less than four decades between the appearance of Salinger's and Ellis' novels. And despite the reviewers' rash assertions, *Less Than Zero* is no 'MTV novel,' a genre which due to the differences between visual and verbal texts will remain impossible. But it is a tale which manages to translate the fast-paced urgency, the total lack of historical awareness, the additive impact and the macabre glitter of musical television into narrative strategies which deserve to be taken seriously as expressions of a contemporary lifestyle and indications of future literary developments.

Source: Peter Freese, "Bret Easton Ellis, Less Than Zero: Entropy in the 'MTV Novel'?," in *Modes of Narrative,* Konigshausen & Neumann, 1990, pp. 68□87.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Pan looks at the stylistic features of Less Than Zero *in relationship to the visual media of television, video and film.*

The first question which comes to mind in reading Ellis' best-seller, *Less Than Zero,* is "Is Los Angeles really like that?" This astonishment betrays not only the vague feeling that one has somehow missed out on all the action in Los Angeles, but also the compulsion to continue reading in order to experience, at least vicariously, all the sordid details of life in the American "elite." This voyeuristic query fits perfectly into the framework of a book in which the closest thing to a plot is the attempt of Clay, the first person narrator, "to see the worst" and in which the characters continually try to certify the authenticity of their experiences. After watching a snuff film, the characters voice the same concern as the readers:

"Yeah, I think it's real too," the other boy says, easing himself into the jacuzzi. "It's gotta be."

"Yeah?" Trent asks, a little hopefully.

"I mean, like how can you fake a castration? They cut the balls off that guy real slowly. You can't fake that," the boy says.

The voyeuristic impulse which grips the snuff film viewers and forces the question, "Is it real?" is the same impulse which propelled *Less Than Zero* to its best-seller status, fueling suspicions of its essentially trashy novel character. But the question "Is it real?" in addition to revealing the voyeuristic stance of the questioner, also expresses a certain incredulity that the scenes depicted might not be fiction, but reality. *Less Than Zero* might really be a journalistic account. Either way, both the pulp fiction and journalistic qualities of the book tend to disqualify it from being real "literature." Yet, even though it has succeeded as a pulp novel and has become, in its abysmal Hollywood filming, a piece of journalistic evidence for crusaders in the war on drugs, it is clear that *Less Than Zero* is not just pulp fiction or journalism. It is also a critique. Whether this critique is successful hinges on the question constantly haunting critics of culture of how to criticize the banal without becoming it. For the primary reason for studying the products of mass culture is their popularity, and to the extent that critics do not share the enthusiasm of the populace, they are also excluded from a true understanding of the influence and significance of mass culture. The successful critic must both identify with the duped cultural consumer and also maintain a reflective stance. Though unable to achieve a satisfactory solution, *Less Than Zero* does make the attempt.

In the novel, the first person narrator, Clay, continuously high on drugs, alcohol or both, wanders from nightclub to nightclub and party to party, mingling with "blond-haired pretty male models," standing mesmerized before video screens, and sleeping with most anybody, male or female, who seems to take a passing interest in him. He is less a character than a spectator of all that happens to him, passively and indifferently

accepting everything around him as if he were watching it on TV. The prose style underlines Clay's virtual lack of individual identity. Though Clay is the first person narrator throughout the novel, his consciousness is at times so inobtrusive that most passages read as if written in the third person. That the reader loses track of the first person narrator in the midst of the action does not merely demonstrate the unreflecting mentality of "Clay" who, presumably faithful to the name, compliantly accepts any situation he happens to find himself in. The indifferent flow of images and events resembles the stream of flat images seen on television. Ellis' prose shares television's drive to continually change the image, to relentlessly keep up the pace of the action, a drive which ultimately debases the image and trivializes the action. Clay's own identity and consciousness is replaced by the string of events which, like the video images before his eyes, he seems to have no control over, and which in the end perhaps entertain for a while, but can never really satisfy. Accordingly, Clay's displays of discontent correspond to the sort of dazed and disgusted feeling one has after having sat in front of the television until three in the morning, and which, if one is like Clay, can quickly be remedied by taking another Valium.

Yet, Clay is not always a passive observer without a conscious perspective of his own. In sharp contrast to this virtual absence of consciousness, Clay at other times demonstrates the same ironic distance which Ellis himself expresses in describing his peers at Bennington College. This attitude becomes obvious in passages where the ironic tone is unmistakable, but at the same time, entirely incompatible with the passive attitude which Clay otherwise displays. Sensing that his MTV prose style threatens to become as banal as MTV itself, Ellis attempts to use such ironic passages to make Clay into a critic. Not only is Clay the example of the passive television viewer who lives his life like he watches a video, he is also the critic of this same attitude, ironically describing the teenagers bathed in images. By combining both perspectives in one character, Ellis attempts an "immanent" critique of mass culture, i.e., from the "inside." This "insider," however, has an implausibly schizophrenic consciousness. Clay as the passive spectator accepts his surroundings as real and submits to their logic, no matter how artificial, distorted, or manipulative. Clay as critic takes the exact opposite tack by completely rejecting through irony the very same object which the spectator so uncritically accepts. Ellis' depiction of Clay as a totally passive media construct takes the logic of the spectator too seriously by denying Clay the participation and feeling which the culture industry manipulates, but never completely eliminates. On the other hand, Clay's rejection of the media world is a failure to take it seriously. The rejection is too facile, as if his critical self could simply erase his voyeuristic self without a trace and his return to an Eastern college at the end of the book could leave "LA decadence" far behind.

Finally, *Less Than Zero's* deadpan, state-of-the-art "MTV" prose demonstrates a problem which is shared by a specific sector of 1980s American culture, the David Byrne mixture of parody and hip cynicism. A conversation in *Less Than Zero* illustrates the problem:

"Yeah, *Beastman!* that was pretty good," the film student says to me. "See it?"

I nod, looking over at Blair. I didn't like *Beastman!* and I ask the film student, "Didn't it bother you the way they just kept dropping characters out of the film for no reason at all?"

The film student pauses and says, "Kind of, but that happens in real life ..."

A characteristic of the film which would normally be considered "bad art" acquires new meaning because it turns out to be a characteristic of "bad reality." But whether the film reproduces bad reality because it is simply unconscious of its inadequacy or it is actually trying to parody reality, the film, as well as *Less Than Zero* itself, falls prey to the same problem. In either case, the resort to a reproduction of clichés in reality demonstrates both a lack of inventiveness and a fascination with the inane which numbs one's sense for the healthy. For even as parody, such a film would contribute to the omni-presence of that which it should resist by failing in its representation of reality to present positive aspects and alternatives within the dominant order. As much as the present media environment might testify to the contrary, reality is not merely "less than zero." Positive elements exist as well, both in reality and as not yet fulfilled possibilities. *Less Than Zero's* suppression of those elements is a capitulation before the media's depiction.

Though he never gets beyond a clichéd description of the two extremes of voyeur and critic and his attempt at combining them in Clay fails to illuminate the complexity of the problem, Ellis' attempt at problematizing the relationship between the two attitudes, whether successful or not, demonstrates the present quandary of American media critics. For as Christa Bürger notes, "even in cases where they find themselves in opposition to contemporary society and culture, they see this society and culture simultaneously as a history which they seek to appropriate as their own." These critics attempt to combine the perspectives of the media "voyeur" and the media "critic." The voyeur is fascinated by that which he sees and allows himself to be led along by the images and the action. The engendering of a voyeuristic attitude is the sign of all successful forms of mass culture: e.g., Hollywood movies, network broadcasting and bestseller novels. Their success lies in their ability to indeed tap real desires and needs and give them expression. At the same time their insidiousness lies in their channeling of the expression of these desires into forms which end up preventing their fulfillment. The critic on the other hand remains distant from the images and refuses to become caught up in the fascination. The critic seeks thereby to expose the subjugation which this fascination means for both viewer and viewed alike. But it is precisely the distance of the critic from the object of criticism which often makes the criticism, on the one hand, unfeeling, and, on the other hand, uninformed. Clay, as ruthless critic of mass media, is certainly guilty of the first charge, and, in spite of his complicity with the captive spectators, voices a critique which is extraordinarily oblivious of their situation. By depicting its characters as totally subsumed within their lifestyle and impossible to differentiate from each other, *Less Than Zero* confirms rather than resists the stereotyped images. But even a critique of mass media which begins as an informed analysis of the spectator often denies the voyeuristic impulse which threatens the analysis. For this analysis has as its basis the same frustrated desire to attain

something real which compels the voyeur. The critic after all seeks the "realization" of that which he finds lacking in the object of criticism.

Which brings us back to the question "Is it real?" At first, this question which the boys in *Less Than Zero* pose about the snuff film does not seem to fit into the logic of voyeurism at all. A voyeur is supposed to be so fascinated by the images and the action that the constructedness and artificiality of what is being viewed remain unconsidered and, in the end, irrelevant. So long as the desired effect (emotional high, suspense, excitement, shock, sexual stimulation, thirst, hunger) is achieved in the receiver, the image has been successful, regardless of whether there is any "reality" to the image. This should apply as well to the snuff film as it does to a TV thriller, a Hollywood movie, a Coca-Cola commercial, or a network news broadcast. In all these examples the images are oriented toward drawing in their viewers and riveting their attention, thereby maintaining sales and improving ratings. The question of the reality behind the images is of secondary concern, often times even irrelevant.

For the critic as well, the question of an outside reality does not seem to always be an issue. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death,* Postman argues that the very logic of the video medium, independent of any other outside factors, threatens to destroy the possibility of rational debate and argumentation in practically every area of public society. In Postman's eyes, the video medium dictates the characteristics of that which is shown through it. The emphasis on immediate images, the need to constantly change the images, and the compulsion to pull elements out of their contexts are unavoidable characteristics of television programming. These properties prevent sustained thought on the part of the viewer and even dissolve the fundamental concept of contradiction upon which all logical thinking is based. According to Postman, the inevitable consequence of the rise of the video media has been the deterioration of political debate in the US. As evidence, Postman contrasts the televised debates between Reagan and Mondale in the 1984 presidential elections with the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates in Illinois. Whereas the Lincoln-Douglas debates were marked by complex argumentation and positions which could be critically studied and further discussed, the emphasis in the Reagan-Mondale debates was on appearances and on a rhetoric reminiscent of television advertising. Postman contends that the change in the character of political debate is a result of the rise of the electronic media. As clear as the contrast is which Postman demonstrates, the conclusion which he draws fails to penetrate to the core of the problem. Because Postman ascribes such overwhelming power to the video medium and holds the medium itself principally responsible for the deterioration of American politics and education, he never discusses the relationship between the television image and an outside reality, a relationship which is crucial for the role of television images in our society. For as Noam Chomsky has pointed out, the spectators of televised sporting events, for example, are extremely well-informed, intellectually sophisticated, and not at all interested in appearances, but rather in concrete results. "I think this concentration on such topics as sports [wrote Noam Chomsky, in *The Progressive,* July 1987] makes a certain degree of sense. The way the system is set up there is virtually nothing people can do anyway, without a degree of organization that's far beyond anything that exists now, to influence the real world. They might as well live in a fantasy world, and that's in fact what they do. I'm sure they're using their common

sense and intellectual skills, but in an area which has no meaning and probably thrives because it has no meaning ..." The problem lies not with a medium which in itself leads to the imbecility of its users, but in the structuring of this medium in a way which excludes the populace from participation in debate about real social issues.

Television in the US demonstrates the absence of such active participation. Whatever the viewers might think or do, their thoughts and actions will have virtually no effect upon that which happens on the screen, in "TV land." However, this lack of participation is not caused by the medium itself, but by the current implementation of this medium within a context of decreasing public debate. The lack of active participation on the part of the typical television viewer in fact mirrors and reinforces the lack of active participation within which typical US "citizens" exist within their society. For the fascination of television viewers is predicated upon their boredom, a boredom which is a result of their exclusion from a participatory role, both in the action on the screen and in their society. The failure of society to provide its members with opportunities for active participation□the state and corporate bureaucratization of modern society□leads to a permanent state of boredom which drives a person to turn on the television set. Bureaucratization of society is the precondition for the development and expansion of the culture industry.

But because the television does not offer anything essentially different than a passive relationship to uncontrollable events either, the boredom which turned on the television in the first place constantly threatens to overtake the viewer again while watching. Consequently, the first rule of American television programming is that the images must constantly entertain the viewer to the point where not only the boredom of the viewer's passive position in front of the television is forgotten, but also the initial boredom in society which drove the viewer to buy the television and turn it on in the first place. This obligation to entertain is not inherent to the video medium itself, as Postman argues, but to the specific situation of American television programming, manifesting itself in its most successful forms as an ability to fascinate viewers, turning them into "voyeurs." For what separates a normal "viewer" from a true "voyeur" is this fascination which allows the voyeur to vicariously participate in the images and the action. This participation remains, however, on the level of voyeurism□the fascination functions, on the one hand, as a passive participation of the viewer with the viewed object which, on the other hand, is based upon the viewer's exclusion from a truly active participatory relationship to this same object. The inability of the typical citizen to influence decision-making in society is the prerequisite for the power the image attains by providing a replacement for such true participation. The citizen, frustrated in the attempt to achieve this goal, accepts the artificial media substitute which distracts the viewer from the original desire for participation to such an extent that it is displaced into a desire for spectacles and diversionary entertainment.

This voyeuristic attitude has become so far-reaching that it has overtaken not only the television viewer but also the television critic. Neil Postman directs his criticism against the medium and does not consider the programming at all. According to Postman, the programming itself cannot be successfully criticized because it has no other alternative but to create the fascination which is demanded by the logic of its medium. He

compares the advent of television to the invention of the printing press. Both are technological advances which actually change the character of truth, according to Postman's invocation of Marshall McLuhan's slogan, "the medium is the message." In Postman's perspective, if the invention of a written language and the Gutenberg press necessarily made truth into something written, expository, and argumentative instead of oral, mnemonic, and aphoristic, the invention of television has made truth into something necessarily visual, spectacular, and entertaining. At this point, Postman's argument, in its attempt to be a strict analysis of the video medium, demonstrates its own participation in the same passive, voyeuristic attitude which it should be criticizing. Postman's description of the development of human technology from the alphabet to the television set, as well as his excusing of television programming because it is merely obeying the logic of its medium, recalls the same attitude which prevails over the television viewer. By viewing both the development of technology and of television programming as if they were occurring on a screen, totally beyond the control of the viewer, he fails to recognize possibilities for interaction with other aspects of society, possibilities which can radically alter the "logic" of television. He in effect affirms these developments by participating in them in the same passive, fascinated way that voyeurs "participate" vicariously in that which they are watching. In both cases the participation is an affirmation of the object which questions neither the relation of the viewer to the object□Postman himself never mentions the voyeuristic quality of this relationship□ nor the extent to which the object both hides and betrays a reality more important than the object itself.

The failure of Postman and the television voyeur to perceive this reality leads in both cases to the assumption that this reality does not exist. With the television voyeur this assumption takes the form of a fascination with the image which considers the question of the reality of this image as

either irrelevant or senseless. The level of fascination is the primary interest. With Postman this assumption expresses itself in the belief that truth itself changes according to the medium. "The medium is the message," and there is no reality behind the medium. Hence Postman cannot even conceive of the possibility that television's fascination might be grounded in a reality separate from it□ the bureaucratization of modern society.

In spite of such denials, however, the question "Is it real?" continues to recur. For the television viewers, the question is an expression of the inadequacy of the pure image in satisfying their desires. For Postman, who implicitly asks a similar question by undertaking a critique of television at all, this question signals the sense of loss remaining after the disappearance of the message in the medium and the withering of public debate in society. If it were not for this sense of loss, Postman would have to embrace television as the bringer of a new age in truth, and all his humanist worries about a society without political debate would be obsolete concerns from out of the antiquated medium of written language. A critique of television would be senseless because the advent of the video medium would be inevitable and unstoppable, as open to criticism and human decision as the movement of the stars in the sky or, in Postman's perspective, the play of images on the screen.

That Postman senses such a loss in spite of his own argument is to be explained by the fact that the phenomenon he is describing is only a part of a larger process of bureaucratization in American society. But Postman's fascination with the logic of the video medium itself causes him to overlook the social prerequisites for television's exploitation of a passive voyeuristic attitude. It is also this oversight which explains his lame liberal solution to the problem which he sees as being confined to the effects of television. His solution is a change in educational policy which would teach children to be "critical viewers." Postman fails to demand changes in television programming and in the bureaucratic organization of both the television industry and American society in general. He thus demonstrates the same paralyzing despair in the face of the power of technological developments and the bureaucratization of society as the despair which draws the voyeur to the image.

An article in the *New York Times* describing a shootout in Miami between FBI agents and two suspected robbers reported that "A few cars traveling on the street merely slowed and steered around the

stalled vehicles as the agents and the robbery suspects exchanged fire. Several witnesses later said they had believed at first they had come across the filming of a scene from the television show*Miami Vice.* Because the witnesses consider reality as if it were an image, the actual shootout is no longer a part of direct experience which has any consequences for those experiencing the event. The motorists could ignore the shooting and steer around just as if it were a television show to be switched off. The stance toward reality becomes a passive one. According to Susan Sontag, whereas "philosophers since Plato" have insisted upon the distinction between image and reality, both a "primitive" sensibility and the "modern" one do without such a distinction. "But the true modern primitivism is not to regard the image as a real thing; photographic images are hardly that real. It is common now for people to insist about their experience of a violent event in which they were caught up□a plane crash, a shoot-out, a terrorist bombing□that 'it seemed like a movie'." As the "Miami Vice" incident demonstrates, Sontag's observation about the transformation of reality into an image is certainly to be taken seriously. The actual development of the video media and the resultant change in the way reality is actually perceived implacably demonstrate that the relationship between image and reality has fundamentally changed since the advent of photographic images. But in her ardor to show that the "powers of photography have in effect de-Platonized our understanding of reality, making it less and less plausible to reflect upon our experience according to the distinction between images and things, between copies and originals," she neglects to develop the distinction between the "primitive" treatment of images as reality and the "modern" treatment of reality as image. For the "primitive," by elevating image to the level of reality, maintains an active relationship to both image and reality and is a participant in both, subject to their influence and able to influence them in turn. An image is not merely an imitation, but an emblem, a talisman, which embodies otherwise unseen powers and which is to be respected as such. The "modern primitive," however, by reducing both reality and image to the level of a TV image, maintains a passive relationship to both reality and image and is a helpless spectator of both. Not only is "Miami Vice" an imitation, but the actual shootout cannot be taken seriously either. Instead of being able to consider both images and thereby also the

metaphysical as serious components of a heterogeneous reality, the "modern primitive" reduces everything to the level of impotent images, shorn of any real significance.

This repression of an active relationship to both image and reality eventually feeds into a latent aggression. The resulting violence comes to light in the fascination of the snuff film viewers in *Less Than Zero.* The passive fascination of these viewers at first fits in with the earlier model of alienation from real participation. The viewers embrace a passive voyeuristic stance which robs them of a direct participation in reality. The boy being castrated and the boy watching the castration do not stand in direct relation to each other. It is only the relationship of their roles which influences each of them. The first boy is not being castrated because one particular boy wanted to watch, but because of the general existence of such a desire. He does not ever see the real viewer, but only the camera, an abstraction of this viewer. The boy who watches is not fascinated by the castration of a particular boy, but by the thought of such a thing happening at all. The original castration was an act of violence performed for the benefit of the camera and, ultimately, of the viewers. Once the event is transferred to the screen, it becomes a spectacle and the questions of intervention, practical action, and morality become irrelevant. Instead, the effects of the images on the viewer become the primary concern.

The frightening aspect of this development is that, together with the stimulation which the snuff film viewers in *Less Than Zero* experience in watching the film is a nonchalance which carries over into their reactions to "real" events. The characters discover a dead body in an alley and carry out the gang rape of a 12-year-old girl with the same detached and yet rapt fascination with which they view a film. Not only that, but their actions actually mimic the actions which they originally see on film. Not only does pure stimulation become the primary concern in watching a film, stimulation, not participation, becomes the essential characteristic of all experience. This change in the character of experience leads in turn to a horrifying revision of the meaning of participation for the snuff film viewers. Whereas the television viewer's passive fascination provides a replacement for direct experience, and the underlying longing for a participatory situation is thus forgotten, the snuff film viewers have reached the point where participation has been redefined as subjugation. In this new sense, the snuff film viewers push for more participation. The thrill which accompanies the young boys' hope in *Less Than Zero* that the castration was "real" is the horrifying expression of a desire on the part of the voyeur to stop being a voyeur and become a participant. For if a young boy had truly been castrated in order to make the snuff film, then the voyeurs have the assurance that their collective gaze, by creating the demand for such a castration, actually did have a real effect on that which they see. The absolute boundary which the screen creates between viewer and viewed, preventing the development of any direct relationship between the two, would have been overcome. But in the case of our snuff film viewers, the breakdown of the absolute boundary between viewer and viewed, far from being the fulfillment of the dream of a participatory democracy, becomes the blueprint for the torture chamber.

The move from passive fascination to active aggression can be traced in the historical development of the forms of mass culture. [Russell] Berman [in *Telos,* Winter 1984-85]

has provided a detailed analysis of this development. Without going into details, it will suffice to note that, in the 1980s, the passification which the image once enforced becomes coupled with a simultaneous unleashing of latent aggression. "The increasingly violent character of culture industrial manipulation is evident not only in the bloodlust of films like *Friday the Thirteenth* and *Halloween,* but in the murderous sociability portrayed in daytime soap operas or prime time series *(Dallas, Dynasty)* in contrast with which the television figures of the 1950s and 1960s seem endearing in their naive accounts of humanistic values." What differentiates the snuff film viewer from the previous description of the television viewer is that the television viewer's passive and "naive" identification derives from an empathy with the characters or the action. Such empathy, the most "endearing" aspect of the television viewer, is missing from the snuff film viewer, as it is from the sadist-torturer. *Leave It to Beaver, Friday the Thirteenth,* and the snuff film are stages in a development in which the viewer gains more and more distance from the action□at first totally empathizing with the characters, and by the end deriving only stimulation from the effects of the images. In this development there remains an essential tie between the voyeur who must settle for a vicarious fulfillment of desire and the snuff film viewer who, unsatisfied with vicarious fulfillment, begins to demand a direct participation which takes the form of a violent subjugation. The fulfillment of desire expresses itself as violent aggression. As Berman argues, "the attack on erotic restriction has turned into its opposite: the restriction of eros to

universal competitiveness and a weakening of the structures with which eros held thanatos in check. The modernist promise of unlimited pleasure has been realized as a constantly increasing aggressive potential..." While Berman here emphasizes the proximity of eros and thanatos□the voyeur and the snuff film viewer□he also relates how this aggressive potential feeds into bureaucratic structures which contain equally destructive impulses.

It turns out, however, that this aggressive potential is also an element of the critic. The element of empathy differentiating the naiveté of the television viewer from the violence of the snuff film viewer, a sign of compassion, was what also caused the television viewers to lose themselves in the television plot in the first place, thereby giving up on social action in reality. The empathy and identification with another's situation, a sign of compassion, leads in this case to both an alienation from one's own situation and a consequent inability to actively criticize this situation. It was precisely this problem against which modernists such as Benjamin and Brecht directed their aesthetics. Through the use of techniques such as montage, distraction, or interruption of dialogue, they sought to break down the identification of the viewer with the characters in order that the viewer might develop a critical stance. But the elimination of identification in the fostering of a critical audience corresponds with the elimination of empathy in the genesis of the snuff film viewer.

This unexpected congruence underlines the fact that the problem of the spectator is twofold and paradoxical. For in both the case of the voyeur and that of the critic, the result is "less than zero." On the one hand, when images become "larger than life," as they do for the voyeur, reality becomes less than the "zero" of the televised image. On

the other hand, when the voyeur has no sympathy in the eyes of the critic, the critic's lack of feeling, his cold castration of the voyeur, is even less appealing than the "zero" of the voyeur's passive fascination. But this cold contempt which the critic too often directs against the voyeur, resulting in a cynical despair, is primarily a result of the critic's failure to identify with and encourage those aspects of the voyeur which are not determined by the video medium. Analyses of film and video which do not recognize the primary role of an outside reality for the development and logic of video must remain trapped within the strict dichotomy of spectator and critic. The successful merging of these two poles and the attainment of something more than that which is being presented on the screen can only come about when this basic question concerning video, "Is it real?" is answered with "Of course not. It's only Hollywood."

Source: David Pan, "Wishing for More," in *Telos,* No. 76, Summer 1988, pp. 143-54.

Adaptations

Less Than Zero was adapted to the screen and produced by Twentieth Century Fox in 1987. The cast includes Robert Downy Jr. and James Spader.

Topics for Further Study

Less Than Zero makes many references to popular American music of the early 1980s. Learn more about this period in American music history. What kind of music do Ellis's characters listen to, and why are these references important to the meaning of the novel?

Less Than Zero has been referred to as the first "MTV novel." The book often includes scenes in which characters are watching music videos on MTV. Learn more about the history of MTV, and other music video channels. How has MTV and the broadcasting of music video changed over the years?

Ellis's novel includes descriptions of excessive drug use by the various characters, including Valium, heroin, cocaine, marijuana, and alcohol. Learn more about drug abuse among teenagers, and how it can affect them. What resources are available for teenagers seeking help in recovering from drug abuse? Report on these resources in your area.

Ellis's novel *Less Than Zero* has been adapted to the screen and released as a Hollywood movie. If you have access to this film, compare and contrast it to the novel. In what ways is the meaning of the novel changed when translated onto the screen? In what was does the film adaptation add to the meaning of the novel?

What Do I Read Next?

The Rules of Attraction (1985) is another novel written by Bret Easton Ellis. This is his second novel and concerns a love triangle among three students at an East Coast college.

James Joyce's A *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) is considered to be the greatest *bildungsroman* in the English language. In this story, Stephen Daedalus is completing his studies at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, but is distracted by aesthetic questions and the temptations of the flesh.

Ellis's controversial novel, *American Psycho* (1991), has been recently made into a popular movie of the same name. It chronicles the activities of a psychotic serial killer inManhattan and is set in the early 1980s.

Lisa Alther's 1976 bestseller, *Kinflicks,* chronicles the story of a young woman who discovers the joys of liberation and sexual experimentation in the 1960s.

The Catcher in the Rye (1951) is a classic novel written by J. D. Salinger. Some critics have compared Ellis's fiction to this American novel of alienated youth in the 1950s.

Further Study

Baughman, Judith, *American Decades: 1980-1989,* Gale, March 1996.

This is primarily an outline of events that happened in the United States during the 1980s. The book focuses on the arts, education, government and politics, law, and sports.

Coupland, Douglas, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture,* St. Martin's Press, October 1992.

This book contains several stories about the culture and attitudes of people born in the 1970s and 1980s.

Sewall, Gilbert, ed., *The Eighties: A Reader,* Perseus Books, November 1998.

This ultraconservative book covers an array of articles that deal with the politics and culture of the 1980s.

Winter, Gibson, *America in Search of Its Soul,* Morehouse Publishing Company, November 1996.

Bibliography

Freese, Peter, "Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero:* Entropy in the 'MTV Novel'?" *in Modes of Narrative,* Konigshausen & Neumann, 1990, pp. 68-87.

Pan, David, "Wishing for More," in *Telos,* No. 76, Summer 1988, pp. 143-54.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Novels for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535