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## Some Like it Dark: Haunting Visions of Modernity in Contemporary American Fiction

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Some Like It Dark: Haunting Visions of the Modernity in Contemporary American Fiction

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Introduction

**Life is so liquid, the signs and messages floating, the bodies and cars so fluid, the hair so blonde, and the soft technologies so luxuriant, that you dream of death and murder, of orgies and cannibalism, to counteract the perfection of the ocean, of the light, of that insane excess of light, to counteract the hypocrisy of everything here.** In the very heartland of wealth and liberation you always hear the same question: 'What are you doing after the orgy?' What do you do when everything is available - sex, flowers, the stereotypes of life and death? This is America's problem, and through America, it has become the world's problem" (Baudrillard, America)

- But I *have* written my memoir, over nine volumes of them — my novels. All have a narrator of the same sort of age as I was, and they are all a reflection of whatever pain, confusion, distress I was going through at the time. And writing each novel helped me move through those problems. It was the end of the Reagan era: yuppies, Manhattan, Wall Street. What it meant to be a man, how masculinity was defined, was very different from what I aspired to be. And yet... I wanted to fit in. (Ellis for Unherd)

“A novel is not BuzzFeed or NPR or Instagram or even Hollywood. Let’s get clear about that. A novel is a literary work of art meant to expand consciousness. We need novels that live in an amoral universe, past the political agenda described on social media. We have imaginations for a reason. Novels like *American Psycho* and *Lolita* did not poison culture. Murderous corporations and exploitive industries did. We need characters in novels to be free to range into the dark and wrong. How else will we understand ourselves?” (Moshfegh Bookforum)

- “All sins are attempts to fill voids” (Simone Weil)

Jean Baudrillard has become the philosopher of the moment, defining and speaking to the conditions of postmodernity. His ideas on the hyperreal, outlined “Simulacra and Simulation” have become the foundation of all theories of post-modernity. What has made his ideas on post-modernity so popular, seeming so prescient, is his definition of the contemporary moment as caught in this post-orgy state. This understanding of postmodern life is most clear in “America”, a less popular work of Baudrillard. In this, is the practical application of the theories described in “Simulacra and Simulation”, through disconnected journal entries of his personal experience on



a cross country trip of America. By looking at this, we can see how this understanding of postmodern life, as hyper real, shifts experience, and causes a crisis of narration.

In “America”, it is clear that for Baudrillard, we live in a time of dreams, already achieved. Extreme wealth, and success have been framed as attainable, on a general cultural level. Postmodern society has established decadence and abundance as attainable, a possibility that is within reach, rather than a distant fantasy. This has shaped all aspirations within postmodern society. Even the working class and the underprivileged experience this post-orgy state. Even if personally, they have not been able to achieve this dream of success and wealth, and these ideals are still framed as personally out of reach, they still exist within the broader context of post-modernity. The reality of the situation does not matter. It does not matter that decadent wealth and abundance have not actually become more attainable to marginalized groups. What matters is this change in perception, decadent and indulgent dreams seeming more in reach within postmodern society, even if in truth they remain distant societal ideals. We can see this expressed, through his understanding of America as a success. Through this sense of America fulfilled, Baudrillard sees a conflict, a nagging feeling of “what now”. A collection of journal entries from Baudrillard’s cross-country trip to the New World, “America” is a sprawling list of observations about modern American culture as a whole which establishes contemporary North American culture as the site of postmodern culture, where Baudrillard’s theories are most embodied and reproduced. For this reason, my project examines how contemporary American fiction portrays the conditions of modern life, in order to expand upon Baudrillard’s theories of postmodernity. Beginning in the late 1960’s, with *Play it as it Lays* by Joan Didion, moving to the 1980’s with *Less Than Zero* by Bret Easton Ellis, and ending in the early 2000’s, with *My*

Year of Rest and Relaxation by Ottessa Moshfegh, I will show how conditions of postmodernity have changed, over time, emphasizing and developing different aspects of postmodern theory.

I have selected these three novels as sites to examine postmodernity both because of their literary themes, and their popular success. While depicting different time periods within postmodernity, all three novels are similarly entrenched with their individual cultural moments, speaking to contemporary cultural forces. This can be seen through a shared depiction of the contemporary culture industry. "Play it as it Lays" speaks to the Hollywood film industry, following an aging actress living in Los Angeles. "Less Than Zero" builds upon this, centering on the teenage children of Hollywood executives, highly saturated with distinctly 80's cultural references. "My Year of Rest and Relaxation" departs from California, instead following a young woman living in Manhattan. The New York City art world replaces the Hollywood film industry, as the narrator's cultural milieu, and the prevailing connection to popular culture. Nonetheless, each of these novels depict the culture industry as a vital and significant aspect of postmodern life. In this way, popular American contemporary literature speaks to Baudrillard's understanding of postmodern life.

More than just commercially successful, each of these novels became cultural sensations, especially popular among younger audiences, for speaking to the unique conflicts of their contemporary moment. Each of these authors benefited from their strong cultural persona as within the time, youthful and in the know. Joan Didion, was first published in Vogue. This shows that she was a distinctly timely writer, speaking to specific moments in time, aware of a modern audience. Bret Easton Ellis too became a cultural phenomenon, in great part because of his cultural persona, situating him as within the times. Like Didion, his success occurred organically, because of his ability to speak to the current moment. "Less Than Zero" was published when he

was 21 years old, still a college student at Bennington. "My Year of Rest and Relaxation" by Ottessa Moshfegh is similarly cast as a cultural phenomena, because of its ability to capture the cultural moment. More than just commercial successes, these novels became part of popular culture. Therefore we can look to these novels as depictions of postmodern life, expanding upon Baudrillard's initial observation of contemporary American life.

In "Play it as it Lays", postmodern loss of narrative is explored through the loss of gender roles as a site of meaning. The cultural context of women's liberation. The nuclear family turned from a source of meaning in culture, to a source of oppression. The depiction of gendered violence. Maria gets an abortion. She clings to male figures to define her. Through this, the desire for narrative to give meaning and purpose. However, everyone fails to live up to these standards. BZ is gay. His relationship is openly a lie. He cannot live up to traditional gender roles. For him, they are not sources of meaning but rather sources of oppression. They are standards that alienate others. Even Maria and Carter fail to live up to gender norms. In fact, gender roles prove harmful. Only through violence, domination and submission, are these roles upheld. Therefore, they are ultimately harmful and inherently impossible standards. Maria's loss of gender roles, expresses postmodern crisis of narrative. Established sources of meaning fail to apply, and are even exposed as destructive. In "Less Than Zero", Bret Easton Ellis depicts the problem of modernity as a lost faith in the transgressive. In this way, he reflects Baudrillard's understanding of postmodernity caught in post-orgy state, draining previous sites of meaning for their significance. The transgressive has lost meaning, because it has become normalized as a part of popular culture, no longer a symbol of rebellion against it. In "My Year of Rest and Relaxation", Moshfegh depicts modern loss of meaning, through a lost faith in the narrative of time.

Chapter 1: *Play It As It Lays*

*Play it as it Lays* by Joan Didion is an exploration of the modern search for meaning and purpose. The story follows Maria Wyeth as she spirals towards an emotional breakdown that leaves her in a mental hospital. Mirroring the modern condition, Maria is faced with the failure of the nuclear family, and traditional gender roles, to be productive sites of meaning and purpose. A beautiful actress, who married a successful young director, Maria has turned to the structure of

the nuclear family and traditional femininity to give her life meaning and fulfillment in the past. Essential to this, is the role of mother, within the nuclear family. Further upholding these traditional sites of meaning, she gets pregnant, in an attempt to assume the role of the mother. However, her daughter Kate develops severe mental problems, and is institutionalized. This picturesque vision of the nuclear family is quickly exposed to be unsustainable. It is broken, suddenly, with no explanation or intention. It cannot be put into a simple narrative of meaning or purpose. It alludes to interpretation. In this way, Didion emphasizes the problem of modernity as one of narration, of trying to find meaning and purpose when previously established sources have proven insufficient. This explains Didion's skepticism towards the revolutionary movements which have become synonymous with the late sixties and early seventies. She accurately predicts their inevitable failure to provide a singular answer/purpose, and is troubled by what this sense of failure will lead to. Additionally, Didion seems to take issue with how many of these movements (especially the general hippie movement, more so than overtly political movement with clear goals and ambitions) exist as negations to previous sites of meaning. In this way they maintain these failed structures, by continuing to use them as the basis for self-definition. However, Didion does not reject any and all searches for meaning and purpose in life. The very fact that she has written this book proves this, along with her many memoirs where she details her own life, literally putting life into a narrative. It is specifically general, universal structures of meaning that she takes issue with, the desire for an easy answer, and the expectation of linear progression.

This can be understood within the context of the contemporary moment Didion is speaking to. For past generations, a fulfilling and satisfying life was framed as one that conformed to existing systems of power. The capitalist economic system, patriarchal conception

of gender, and the structure of the nuclear family (which arose out of the combination of these two systems of power) gave individuals distinct roles to embody, a specific purpose to fulfill within these systems. In “Family Systems of the 1970’s: Analysis, Policies and Programs”, Marvin Sussman defines the nuclear family as “husband, wife, and offspring living in a common household” (42). Its traditional form relies on distinct roles between men and women, with “male as breadwinner and female as homemaker” (Sussman 43). On top of providing a sense of purpose and meaning, conforming to these assigned roles also boar social rewards. A housewife, married young with children, sweet and soft-spoken, who spends her time knitting and cooking would be well respected and even admired within her community for conforming to the feminine role assigned to her. A single, working mother on the other hand would be looked down upon, seen as a failure whether she was divorced or had a baby out of wedlock. Prior to the late 1960’s, family forms that varied from the traditional nuclear family... were viewed as deviant”, even within scientific research. Sociologists interested in alternative family structures such as single parents households or dual-work families were “mainly concerned with the deleterious effects of such gainful employment upon children” (Sussman 44). Such pressure to conform to rigid roles, as a source of meaning and purpose, inevitably led to feelings of restriction, and therefore was ultimately unsustainable. Conforming to one’s roles within the nuclear family became less a rewarding source of purpose, and more an oppressive force. Those who could not fit into these roles (the working class, gays and lesbians) were shamed, chastised by society for falling to fulfill their purpose.

Throughout the 1960’s, women entered the workforce at an unprecedented rate, and the nuclear family of the 1950’s began to rapidly deteriorate. This was due largely to the growth of women in higher education. In “Dynamic Social Norms and the Unexpected Transformation of

Women's Higher Education, 1965–1975”, sociologist Stacey Jones explores the relationship between women in higher education, and women in the workforce. In the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, there was a transformation of women’s role in higher education. As women were entering the workforce at an unprecedented rate, there was also a dramatic increase in women going to college. In 1969, Princeton and Yale began admitting women into their undergraduate programs. By 1972, all accredited law and medical schools admitted women (Jones 255). Jones goes on to directly link the increase of women in higher education to women joining the workforce. Women who pursued a higher education were on the whole, more likely to join the workforce. Therefore, when there is an increase of women in higher education, that there will be an increase of women in the workforce. For Jones, such a sharp and sudden change cannot be attributed to a single unexpected event, such as the invention of the birth control pill. Instead, it is explained as an expression of social change, where “social transformation is delayed, despite an accumulation of factors, pushing towards change, because individuals are unwilling to diverge from prevailing social norms alone. However, when the share of individuals willing to break with prevailing social norms reaches a critical threshold, a tipping point is reached at which rapid and large-scale social change takes place” (250). Even as more women went to college, and entered the workplace, there was an emphasis on maintaining the ideals of the nuclear family. Women were still restricted to work that was related to the domestic sphere, such as nursing, or teaching. They were encouraged to find a good husband in college, to marry young, and to quit their jobs after having children. Career and family are still placed fundamentally at odds. However, in the late sixties, there was a shift in the role of women in higher education and joining the workforce. There was an increase of women majoring in traditionally male dominated fields such as law and engineering. Therefore, the main shift was not just in the amount of

women going to college and joining the workforce, but also a change in the social role of women as “agents who work because they and their families ‘need the money’ to those who are employed, at least in part, because occupation and employment define one’s fundamental identity and societal worth. It involved a change from “jobs” to “careers,” where the distinction between these two concepts concerns both horizon and human capital investment” (Goldin 1). Women were no longer going to college to find a husband, or joining the workforce simply out of economic necessity, to temporarily supplement their husbands income. As Jones writes, “College and university women's increased emphasis on career began to influence household decisions about geographic location, childbearing and child care, consumption, divorce, and the division of household labor. A growing number of college and university women had no children, and those who had children did so later in life”, contributing to a significant change in the social role of women. Once allowed to pursue interests outside of the family, women became dissatisfied being limited to the domestic sphere and “by the 1960s growing numbers of women felt ‘stilted and thwarted by child care, chauffeuring, and baking the endless rounds of chocolate chip cookies’ (Schmuck 1980: 172). A 1962 Gallup poll found that 90 percent of housewives “did not want their daughters to lead the same type of life they had led. They hoped their daughters would get more education and marry later” (Tyack and Hansot 1990: 245). The reception of Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* in 1963 revealed that large numbers of homemakers found their apron strings too tight ” (Jones 265). The rise of women’s education reflected a rise of women joining the workforce.

However, the most important change that occurred in the late 1960’s was not simply an increase of women in the workforce, but a fundamental change in the horizon for women who worked. As major men's colleges opened their doors to women, allowing women to pursue



typically male dominated fields such as medicine and law, women were no longer limited to joining the workforce only temporarily, to supplement the income of the male breadwinner. Instead, women could now pursue careers, not just jobs. This can be tied to the growing dissatisfaction of housewives, and their role in the nuclear family. The women's movement gained traction, inspired by the success of the civil rights movements, more broadly raising the question of equal rights, and demonstrating how resistance movements could transform formal legislation. We can see this inspiration reflected in how the women's rights movement often borrowed tactics from the civil rights movement. The most obvious case of this being when " Representative Howard Smith of Virginia moved to amend Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, the title barring discrimination in employment, to bar discrimination on the basis of sex. The addition of "sex" to the bill was seen by many as an attempt to prevent its passage; no member of Congress who spoke in favor of the amendment voted for the bill as amended" however more than a historical fluke, this tied together sexual and racial discrimination as ideologies (Jones 258). By the late sixties and early seventies, the traditional nuclear family of the 1950's was an outdated source of meaning, incompatible to the modern age. Not only was the nuclear family exposed as unsustainable, and unrealistic, but it became seen as a source of oppression, as the women's movement began to gain traction. Conforming to the roles of the nuclear family once held the promise of a fulfilling, satisfying life. By the late sixties and early seventies, this promise was exposed as false. The rise of women in the workforce proved that women were equally capable of taking on traditionally masculine roles, competent at their jobs, and providing for their families. It also proved that women could find satisfaction and fulfillment without conforming to the rigid gender roles. Therefore, the perspective on the nuclear family shifted from a positive source of meaning, to a negative site of oppression, not providing but in fact

restricting the fulfillment and satisfaction of women. For Didion, the revolutionary movements of this time period were an expression of disillusionment towards established sources of meaning, such as the nuclear family where the woman takes up a subservient role, restricted to the domestic sphere.

This rejection of simple narrative is reflected in the structure of the novel. The story is nonlinear, beginning after the events described have already transpired. Importantly, the novel ends at this point, with Maria in a mental hospital after the events of the novel and the death of BZ. There is still a narrative to the story, a sense of time and a structure, but it is specific. Didion does not try to put her story into a generally accepted novel structure, rather she creates a new kind of structure in order to better tell this specific story. There are still chapters in the novel, but they are uniquely short, sometimes only a few sentences. At times, a chapter may not move the story forward, resisting linear progression. Chapter 52 is just a list, a few sentences long:

“Maria made a list of things she would never do. She would never: walk through Sands or Caesar’s alone after midnight. She would never: ball at a party, do S-M unless she wanted to, borrow furs from Abe Lipsey, deal. She would never: carry a yorkshire in Beverley Hills” (Didion 136)

Sometimes, the chapters are explicitly connected through linear time, maintaining expectations that as a novel progresses, it is progressing through time “Late that night...when Carter called the next morning” (52). However, at other moments the story jumps around in time, breaking from the traditional novel form. Chapter 38 is a conversation between Carter and Maria, about BZ:

“ ‘What have you been doing,’ Carter said the next time she saw him.  
 ‘Working. I’m going to be working very soon.’

‘I mean who’ve you been seeing.’

‘Nobody. Helene. BZ. BZ comes by sometimes.’

‘Don’t get into that,’ Carter said.

‘He’s your friend,’ Maria said” (Didion 109)

The following chapter skips around in time, moving from a conversation about BZ, in the present tense, to the story of how BZ and Maria first met, moving backwards. Always, there is some sense of connection between chapters, but this connection is not always linear time, the events of one chapter leading to the events of the next. It seems much more like the inside of someone's mind, connecting to other events in a myriad of different ways. In fact, the fragmented, nonlinear storyline enacts Maria’s own fragmented consciousness, sitting alone in a mental hospital, her mind jumping across different memories. BZ’s conversation with Maria leads to a retelling of their first meeting, as if something in their conversation has reminded Maria of this meeting. Additionally, the novel employs several different perspectives in its opening, breaking from traditional narratives. The novel opens with an especially personal chapter in Maria’s perspective, told in the first person. This sets up the reader’s expectations, that this is the way the story will be told throughout. Immediately, this expectation is subverted, jumping to Helene’s perspective, and then to Carter’s. Again, novelistic expectations are subverted when the first chapter, and the vast majority of the story, is told in the third person. However, the narrative voice remains unfixed. Towards the end of the novel, Maria’s first person narration returns, with several chapters told completely in her perspective. Not only does Didion break from traditional novelistic structure and narration, but she resists any single narrative style, and any single way of organizing the chapters. As Sandra Hinchmen details in her essay “Making Sense and Telling Stories: Problems of Cognition and Narration in Joan Didion’s *Play it as it Lays*”, “reality in the

novel is fractured, disjointed, strobe-like”, echoing Maria’s own difficulty to perceive her life as a coherent narrative. She employs the technique which is most appropriate for a specific moment, and therefore allows for fluidity in the narrative voice she uses, changing throughout the novel. Didion’s resistance to a single fixed narrative voice reflects her understanding of life as too complex to be contained by any single overarching technique. For Didion, it is not just traditional sites of meaning that must be rejected, but all generalizing sources of meaning. Meaning and purpose must be arrived at personally, to speak to one’s specific condition, and must constantly be revised and readjustment.

By centering on Maria, a character who suffers an emotional breakdown when confronted with the failure of previous understandings of life to make sense of her situation, Didion speaks to the greater crisis of faith facing modernity. The novel follows Maria through a series of tragic events. Already, Maria has had to deal with her mother’s suicide and the death of her father, leaving her without any family. After the institutionalization of her only daughter due to a severe mental disability, Maria’s marriage to Carter falls apart. Before their divorce, Maria gets pregnant, likely by her lover and Carter forces her to get an abortion. This jeopardizes the nuclear family, and feminine gender roles, as sources of meaning and purpose for Maria. All they can provide is a feeling of failure.

Through her fantasies, the images she uses to comfort herself, it is clear that these structures were central to Maria’s self-definition:

“Calmed, she would fall asleep pretending to even then lay with him in a house by the sea. The house was like none she had ever seen but she thought of it so often that she even knew where the linens were kept...Every morning in that house she would make the bed with fresh sheets. Every day in that house she would cook

while Kate did her lessons...and later when the tide ran out they would gather mussels together..and they would sit down together..and they would eat the mussels and drink a bottle of cold white wine and after a while it would be time to lie down again, on the clean white sheets” (Didion 114)

As the novel is largely an exploration of how Maria deals with the failure of established sites of meaning, this is one of the few sections that provides direct insight into Maria’s productive sense of self, the values and structures she hopes to embody, who she wants to be. This aspirational dream life reveals how important predetermined roles and structures of meaning are for Maria. The intricacy of this fantasy, Maria knowing all the details of her dream life, down to what plates she would use, what linens, and where everything would be, emphasize Maria as someone who craves order, structure, routine. She is comforted by familiar images which she knows well. In her dream life, she would do the same thing “every morning”, and “every day” would blend together, neat and uncomplicated. Maria is seduced by the structure of the nuclear family, and traditional feminine gender roles, because they simplify the complexity of life. Within these structures, Maria can renounce autonomy and agency. She can continue to define herself by others, and by predetermined roles outlined by society at large requiring no self reflection, no personal distinction of herself as an individual:

“In the story Maria told herself at three or four in the morning there were only three people and none of them had histories, only the man and the woman and the child, in the lamplight, the opalescent mussel shells” (Didion 114-115)

In her fantasy, Maria admits that she craves a kind of loss of self, through the roles of the family. She wants to become just “woman”, not Maria, not her specific self. This is how

she would like to be, and also how she wants others to be, vague types flattened of complexity. She does not crave Les Goodwin, Carter, or any man in particular. In fact, they are replaceable. As Rodney Simard points out in her article “The Dissociation of Self in Joan Didion’s *Play it as it Lays*”, Maria does see any of the men in her life as complex beings. To her, “Carter is no more than ‘husband’”, not “a vital human being”. It does not matter exactly who is filling this role for Maria, only that someone is doing it (Rodney 72). In some dreams, Carter is the man, taking on the role of the husband, in some day dreams, one of her lovers is placed in this role.

Constantly, Maria reduces the people around her to types, predictable and unsurprising, in order to access apathy, to remove herself emotionally. In her divorce with Carter, she “tried very hard to keep thinking of Carter in this light, as a dropper of friends and names and obligations, because if she thought of Carter as he was tonight she would begin to cry again” (Didion 52). Kate’s mental illness, her personality, any aspect that separates her and makes her distinct, is ignored. She cannot accept the reality that no one truly embodies these types, not herself or any of the people around her. Held up to these structures, her life becomes a total failure. The idealism of Maria expectations are emphasized in her fantasies:

“...the spectre of his joyless face would reach her, talk about heart’s needle, would flash across her hapless consciousness all the images of the family they might have been: Carter throwing a clear plastic ball filled with confetti, Kate missing the ball. Kate crying. Carter swinging Kate by her wrists. The spray from the sprinklers and the clear plastic ball with the confetti falling inside and Kate’s fat arms stretched up again for the catch she would always miss. Freeze frame. Kate

fever, Carter sponging her back while Maria called the pediatrician. Kate's birthday. Kate laughing, Carter blowing out the candle. The image would flash at Maria like slides in a dark room. On film they might have seemed a family" (Didion 138)

Her image of family is laden with the language of film. However, this idealized image immediately rings false, an overly saccharine view of what they "might have been" as opposed to an honest reality. Her family could uphold these standards only in appearance, "on film" and when acting purposefully. This language of story and film shows how Maria seeks to put life into a familiar narrative. They reveal how the tendency to retreat to these narratives for comfort "sucked into ritual action and response, as if following a script", absolving her of any agency or control (Rodney 74). Yet, she turns to narratives that lack in specificity, and therefore her search for meaning is doomed to fail, because she cannot account for any complexity. This inevitable failure is emphasized through the constant language of dream, and fantasy that surrounds these images. They exist, "on film", in "stor[ies]" Maria tells herself, what "might have been" and never what was. These images can never enter into reality. When attempted to be cast onto reality, they inevitably collapse. As Maria describes "the mussels were poisoned", portraying these romantic hopes are dangerous, ultimately causing harm, by breeding disappointment and disenchantment. They are deceitful images of hope, because they are bound to fail.

BZ and Helene's relationship mirrors Carter and Maria's, both rooted in fantasy. However, BZ's relationship to the fantasy of the nuclear family is fundamentally different from Maria and Carter's, in that he has always known these romantic ideals to be "poison". BZ's queerness means that the nuclear family was always a threatening

force for him. Unlike Carter and Maria, there was never any romantic hope for his marriage, no genuine belief in it as a viable source of purpose and meaning. For BZ, hitting Helene is an expression of frustration, a desire to reclaim control. Violence becomes a kind of truth telling device. It is physical and direct. It is mean and ugly. It cannot be hidden, or ignored. It is one real, honest thing in a world full of illusion. However in this scene, BZ is otherwise committed to maintaining apathy. The morning after a disturbing night out, Helene begins to cry, remembering the events that transpired. BZ, on the other hand, remains apparently unbothered. Hiding his eyes behind dark glasses, he minimizes Helene's distress as routine "hangover terror", delegitimizing an honest display of emotion. His voice is soft, his tone mocking. To BZ, Helene's genuine horror over their night together is childish, and weak. 'If you can't deal with the morning, get out of the game. You've been around a long time, you know what it is, it's play-or-pay,' he says, establishing that their drunken debauchery and taboo sex is not out of the ordinary, but just another part of their routine. Here, he reminds Helene of the trade off she has made. After all, she has agreed to play the game, just as much as BZ and Maria. Therefore, she should not be shocked at the consequences, the feeling of shame that comes from "playing the game", renouncing traditional morality (need to define this, source) and safety in search of pleasure, and money. BZ chastises Helene's tears, not because they are an honest display of emotion, but because he sees these tears as self-indulgent, and an inability to accept the world they have chosen to inhabit.

Ironically, in his violence toward Helene BZ reclaims his role of "man" in relation to "woman":



“‘ I can’t take this, Helene.’ BZ was wearing tinted glasses and for the first time Maria noticed a saf beneath his eyes. ‘If you can’t deal with the morning, get out of the game. You’ve been around a long time, you know what it is, it’s play-or-pay.’ ‘Why don’t you go tell that to Carlotta,’ Helene whispered. Maria closed her eyes at the instant BZ’s hand hit Helene’s face. ‘Stop it’ she screamed. BZ looked at Maria and laughed. ‘You weren’t talking that way last night, ’ he said. ”

(Didion 164)

By hitting Helene, he expresses dominance over her and upholds the power dynamic of the nuclear family, “man” as dominant and “woman” as submissive. “Man” as reasonable, realistic, “woman” as irrational, overly sensitive. In this way he lays bare the innately destructive dynamics of traditional sites of meaning. His response to being labeled a failure for his inability to uphold masculine ideals is when BZ most upholds these ideals the most. When he does it is not comforting, but disturbing. Maria closes her eyes. Even in her state of apathy and detachment, she reacts viscerally to this act of violence, a distinctly male display of power over woman. It is a familiar dynamic, echoing Maria’s relationship to Carter, where she is also the female object of male violence. BZ’s violence towards Helene shows the inherently abusive power dynamics hiding behind the wholesome image of the nuclear family, where the man is dominant over the woman. He disspells all romantic notions behind the nuclear family, that it is the natural order of life that will provide the most fulfillment and satisfaction, by showing how it is ultimately meant to maintain masculine power over women.

While Maria looks down upon BZ, calling him a degenerate, and consistently expressing disgust with the arrangements of his marriage, she nonetheless shares with

him the same inability to fit into traditional expectations. Just as much as BZ cannot uphold traditional standards of masculinity, Maria fails to uphold traditional standards of femininity. Her first daughter is born severely mentally disabled, and then she illegally aborts what would likely have been an illegitimate child. She has had several affairs, both times with married men, the husbands of friends, acquaintances. Her own marriage is just as much a “sick arrangement”, as BZ and Helene’s. She is similarly faced with traditional expectations as restrictive, not hopeful. The same standards that would label BZ as a degenerate, would label her a failure as well. This shared conflict of narration is revealed explicitly in BZ’s reaction to Carter’s film starring Maria, where she gets gang raped by a biker gang. He directly asks Carter what the “meaning” of this movie was, how these actions were meant to be interpreted. Like Maria, he questions familiar sites of purpose as inherently meaningful. Maia cannot help but to see her relationships to men, as roles to fulfill, ingenuine. In her conversations with Les Goodwin, after the divorce with Carter, she cannot continue to have the same relationship with her. She sees in her relationship to him, a role that she is being put in. She is aware of what she “should” say, even of the exact words. Yet, she cannot continue to uphold herself to that standard. Like BZ she sees that falseness behind them, understands their inability to generate their promised meaning. She is unable to be a mother. She is unable to be a wife. She is unable even to be a mistress, an object of desire. She cannot continue to use these standards as a basis for morality without condemning herself, and therefore she is faced with the same realization, that, “NOTHING APPLIES” (Didion 4). They must find different ways to find meaning in their lives. However, only Maria succeeds.

The difference between Maria's personal perspective in the beginning of the novel, and the third person point of view adopted for most of the novel, is that after being institutionalized, Maria has been able to live with the "nothingness" of the world. She openly admits that attempts to find motives in the actions of others is impossible, a question better left unexplored. There can be no satisfying answer, and so the only solution is to live in the "now". As Simard points out, after her institutionalization she "is willing to accept the present, unembellished by analyses or alterations of the past and unfettered by considerations of the distant future" (78). She stops caring about how she looks to her friends, whether her actions are excusable by anyone else's standards. Therefore, she is able to exist in a more honest way. She can recognize that to look for "meaning...is besides the point" (Didion 4). Maria is set free by facts, by choosing to exist in truths, instead of conforming to ideals and therefore living in fantasy. She doesn't ask why Iago is evil anymore, showing how she no longer searches for motivations, and justification (Didion 1). She is no longer interested in passing a judgment onto actions. She does not search for reasons, or moralization of her actions. Only through this lens can she confront the reality of her situation and of her actions. Only by removing herself and her actions from the moralizing narrative, can she take accountability for what she has done. She says, about her actions, the possibility of her irredeemability, her moral damnation: "Just so. I am what I am" (Didion 1). It is a strong statement of self, matter of fact, unyielding even to the possibility of moral failure. This is in stark contrast to Carter's reaction to BZ's suicide, who continues to misunderstand life by comparing it to film, a constructed work of art, with a conscious creator and the obligation of purpose. He attempts to find meaning by placing reality into the fictive field of film. He images the

past, as “scenes” in a movie, that could be replayed to reveal some “pattern”, through rational analysis. This understanding of life ultimately leads him to disappointment.

“Less Than Zero” by Bret Easton Ellis was one of the most popular books of the 1980’s. This period in America was characterized by a return to extravagant consumerism, a significant shift from the revolutionary, anti-capitalist movements which characterized the 1960’s and 70’s. This shift was reflected politically, with the election of Ronald Reagan as president, a landslide victory against Jimmy Carter. As Nancy Riveria Brooks points out, the 1980’s was also a time of rapid technological growth. Advancements such as the walkman and the personal computer, made popular culture accessible to the average American household in a new way . This tech boom influenced and encouraged the consumerism which has come to define the 1980’s within American history (Brooks). MTV was created, making pop music more accessible than ever. Teenagers and young adults became an extremely lucrative demographic, especially eager to partake in trends and be interested in popular media. In her essay, “The Reception of Less Than Zero”, Sonia Baelo-Allue describes the appeal of adapting the novel into a film. In the 80’s the “ ‘young adult’ market had already been discovered by Hollywood since the explosion of teenpics in the 1950s” but “ in 1985, it was in full bloom with the success of films such as *The Breakfast Club* and *St. Elmo’s Fire* ”. The financial success of marketing towards teenagers and young adults led to a fixation on youth culture within popular media of the 80’s. These conditions primed Ellis for literary stardom, as a young author, writing about the lives of young adults. In this chapter, I will be putting the contents of Ellis’s novel within the context of its time, by observing how Ellis’s literary persona was constructed, and then examining the cultural reception of his work. Doing so situates the critiques of culture and media presented in the novel as specific to Ellis’s time, identifying key elements of modernity. For Ellis, modernity is defined by emotional numbness, and social disconnection, arising from the technological advancements and consequent consumerist culture promoted during the 1980’s.

Ellis's novel worked to critique the consumer culture which defined 1980's America, exposing these conditions as leading to emotional numbness and immorality. He provides a critique of the apparent progress of the 80's resulting from the economic boom and , as leading to deevolution of social bonds and morality, as opposed to advancement. However, he simultaneously benefitted from the very culture he critiqued. As Baelo-Allue points out, "many of the reviews of 'Less Than Zero' were a mixture of interview and profile where there was no assessment of the novel but rather a retelling of the story of Ellis's success. After all, at that moment, he represented a version of the American dream: he was very young and already with a first novel in the market that had become a bestseller" (Baelo-Allue 40). Susan Squire's interview with Bret Easton Ellis for The Los Angeles Times, is titled "Zeroing in on Bret Easton Ellis: Embraced by N.Y Literati for his First Novel, the Young L.A Author Ponders an Encore", emphasizing Ellis's celebrity persona over the contents of his novel. His success story is the center of the conversation, the defining characteristics of his persona. The article opens, "It's a little before 2 p.m. at Woods Gramercy, a peach-walled expense-account restaurant where the tables of Manhattan's publishing power lunchers are spaced discreetly apart. At the round table that anchors the room sits the best-seller task force of Penguin Books, encircling an uneasy college student who is picking at his goat cheese and smoked salmon omelet" (Squire 1985). Here, Ellis is characterized as a deer in the headlights, prey ripe for the slaughter, an "uneasy college student" being encircled by hungry literary executives. Ellis is positioned as a literary outsider, unprepared for his own success. As Squire emphasizes in her coverage of Ellis, it is his youthful nature that makes him an outsider, leading him to be inexperienced with the formal procedures that surround him, humble to the point of self-deprecation, reluctant to voice literary concerns. This naivete, this unpolished outsider persona that Squire constructs is seductive,

alluring. An honest, unpretentious look at the concerns of kids these days, straight from the source. This sense of gritty, unfiltered truth that Ellis's persona offers is only given more legitimacy the more Ellis stumbles. His unfamiliarity with the business side of writing, confessing "that he remembers the name of only one of the team that is laboring to make him the most famous young writer since Truman Capote", his "sincere bewilderment" at his own success, his "considerable embarrassment" at being an object of praise, all further Ellis's persona as an unpolished, painfully truthful literary outsider. Ellis's youthfulness is therefore a fundamental part of his persona, the quality that makes him an outsider. Ellis's persona is constructed within popular media as a representation of "a verison of the American dream" (Baelo-Allue). Just as youth has defined American mythology and cultural identity, central to the popular narrative of the United States as an underdog success story, Ellis was defined by his youth in popular culture, reflecting the American dream of a young outsider reaching success through pure talent and hard work.

In "Less Than Zero", Ellis characterizes modern life as marked by a lack of punishment, emerging from a normalization of the transgressive. Through conditions specific to modernity , the transgressive loses the very edge that makes it transgressive. Modernity is then characterized by a hopelessness, a sense of the inescapable, with even transgressive feeding into commercialization. This characterization of modernity as a kind of devolution is reflected in the plot of "Less Than Zero", which follows Clay, a college student visiting his home during winter break. By centering the story on the interior world of a young man, during a turbulent time of adjustment and change, the novel draws on classic coming-of-age narratives. However, Clay's story does not follow the path of progress and self-discovery typical of coming-of-age stories. Instead, he experiences a de-evolution, sinking deeper and deeper into the immorality that

surrounds him. There are five scenes in the novel where Clay is confronted with immorality and decadence that surrounds him. The first is at a party, when he watches a friend inject herself with heroin in the bathroom, as the rest of his friends watch gleefully. The second is also at a party, when Trent shows him and his friends a snuff film. Later, Trent recreates this snuff film with his friends, kidnapping and raping a thirteen year old girl. This is followed by Clay being shown a dead body in the back alley of a nightclub. Finally, the novel concludes with Clay following Julian as he meets with his pimp and goes on a job. Clay watches his best friend get abused and drugged by his pimp, and then raped by his client. The scenes grow gradually in grotesqueness, depravity and immorality becoming more explicit as the novel progresses in its narrative. As the events Clay witnesses become more and more disturbing, his inaction and passivity also become more disturbing, increasingly a sign of his own immorality. Unlike classic coming of age tales, the narrative of "Less Than Zero" is one of descending further into darkness and depravity, as opposed to ascending out of it, towards self-discovery and maturity. Through this inversion of plot structure, Ellis shows a disillusionment with the idea of progress, and characterizing modernity as a state of progression, and improvement upon the past.

For Ellis, these conditions of modernity are a reaction to the failure of revolutionary movements in the 60's and early 70's. This is because, in modern life, there are commercial rewards for expressions of the transgressive. Youth culture in particular, the youthful desire for rebellion, is commodified. It becomes a marketing tool, encouraging hypercommercialism as opposed to posing a threat to it. Rebellion is absorbed back into mainstream culture, and then loses its edge through the loss of negation. The mere idea of the transgressive is no longer satisfying, loses its power to fill something, loses its power of catharsis. The transgressive provides a sense of renewal, shedding something away. When ideas and simulations of the



transgressive are commodified, they are reproduced so much that their sense of catharsis is lost. From this, emerges a desire to make the transgressive an immediate reality, no longer a forbidden point of aspiration by which to release desire. A loss of faith in the potential of the transgressive to provide this, a need to “prove it” through reality. This is seen in the progression of violence within “Less Than Zero”. Specifically, the snuff film which leads Clay’s friends kidnapping and raping and twelve year old girl. When this desire to “prove” the transgressive is paired with the ability to make the transgressive a reality, dissatisfaction is inevitable.

To be able to make the transgressive a reality relies on privilege. For the privileged, the decadence of the transgressive realm is accessible, often bleeds into everyday life. Already, those existing within this privilege have a blunted sense of the transgressive because of this. The privileged develop a certain degree of tolerance for the transgressive, and the decadent. Therefore, the privileged must dig deeper into darkness (sin) , in order for ideas and simulations of the transgressive to be cathartic. (The transgressive as tied to sin). The commodification of the transgressive through media, which is an ever present force, compounds this. To have privilege within the modern world means there is no satisfaction in the transgressive. Instead, an endless pit is created, constantly compounding in darkness. There is no thrill to being transgressive, when it provokes no reaction, causes no friction. It fails to be transgressive. However, the need to purge excess desire remains necessary for satisfaction. With each failed attempt at transgression, these desires build up, grow stronger and more extreme through lack of negation. Actions become more and more extreme, begging to be punished, condemned. But there is no external punishing force. A fetishization of the undesirable then occurs, to create the negating force which is necessary.

In “Less Than Zero”, Bret Easton Ellis depicts emotional disconnection, and numbness as an inescapable aspect of the modern condition, through his portrayal of Clay’s relationships. Clay’s behavior towards his family, his friends and his girlfriend is shocking, going against all expectations of what these relationships should look like. Specifically, it is Clay’s cavalier, nonchalant attitude towards people who are meant to be loved ones, which is shocking. Familial relationships are loaded with emotional expectations, denoting the feelings people should have towards each other, and how they treat each other. It is an expectation that families love each other, that parents take care of their children. However, Clay’s relationship with his family flies in the face of these expectations, completely devoid of emotion and obligation. The first time Clay’s family fails to meet these expectations is when he arrives at his house, and “nobody’s home”, his “mother and sisters are out, Christmas shopping” (Ellis 10). They are not excited that he has returned home, they are not eager to catch up about his time in college. They don’t care at all. The emptiness of his family home reflects the emotional emptiness of their relationship. They appear to be a family, but there are no emotional bonds between them. They do not behave like a family. This becomes more clear when Clay spends an afternoon with his mother and sisters. Clay does not differentiate his sisters by name, but by age, saying “the older of my sisters, who I think is fifteen” and “the other one...I think she’s thirteen. Maybe” (Ellis 24). Clay is so disconnected from his family that he does not name his sisters, and cannot even be sure of their ages. They are almost interchangeable to him. Then, his sister’s start to pester him about why he keeps his door locked. For a moment, it seems like a familiar family scene, sibling bickering until Clay reveals they “both stole a quarter gram of cocaine from me the last time I left my door open” (Ellis 25). His mother, in the car as when he says this, has no reaction whatsoever. This lack of reaction is a particularly disturbing response, because it signifies a lack of emotion. Even

a negative reaction, like extreme anger, would at least mean she had some sort of emotions towards her children. It would mean she cared, in some way, about her family. Instead, there is an absence of reaction, a void of emotion. It is not just towards his family that Clay experiences this void of emotion. His friendships and romantic life are also marked by similar instances of nonreaction, indicating a lack of emotional investment towards these people, and these relationships. When he visits his supposed friend, who is in the hospital for anorexia, there is no narration of any emotion, no sign that this experience, seeing a friend in such a condition, going through such a struggle, has any impact on him. His relationship with Blair, his ex-girlfriend, is similarly devoid of any sense of intimacy. When Blair and Clay have sex for the first time since Clay's return, only the aftermath is included within the text, like an "off-screen" sex scene. This places an emphasis on Clay's reaction, or rather, his nonreaction. Again, there is a complete absence of emotional language. Instead, Clay robotically narrates getting up, showering, drying his hair, and then leaving, without exchanging a single word with Blair, not even a glance. Not only does this demonstrate the lack of emotional connection between the two, but it also shows that the couple has no sense of obligation towards each other, no investment in fulfilling the role of boyfriend, lover, or even friend. Through his depiction of Clay's family, Ellis shows apathy as permeating even the most intimate of relationships. There is nowhere to turn for comfort, there is no one who cares, not even family. Emotional numbness and disconnection are further shown to be an inescapable aspect of modernity, by showing a change in geography and location as an insufficient means of escape. "My eyes keep wandering off the screen and over to the two green exit signs that hang above the two doors in the back of the movie theater" (Ellis 97). "'I want to go back,' Daniel says, quietly, with effort. 'Where?' I asked, unsure. There's a long pause that kind of freaks me out... 'I don't know. Just back'" (Ellis 18). Escape as rooted in the temporal,

not the geographic. There is a desire to go back to a time of innocence, before decadence, and corruption. Before numbness. But Ellis shows that this is impossible. "I look over at Julian and the image of a sports club after school in fifth grade comes back to me" (Ellis 170) . As Clay watches his best friend get assaulted by his pimp, he experiences a nostalgic desire for a time of innocence, but to return to this innocence is impossible.

Along with a rise of consumer culture, the 1980's was also marked by a sharp turn towards conservatism and traditional values, away from the revolutionary movement which characterized the 1960's and 70's. The popularity of these movements caused them to lose their transgressive edge, as they became absorbed into the mainstream without producing much material changes. This caused mass disillusionment towards the revolutionary potential of the transgressive. With the failure of the hippie generation, faith in the revolutionary power of the transgressive was also lost. Traditional values replaced the meaning the transgressive once had, as a way to live a fulfilling and impactful life. Narratives which reinforced traditional values were favored, as seen through the film adaptation of 'Less Than Zero', which changes the story significantly so that its narrative works to reinforce traditional values as a source of meaning. This is most blatantly seen in how the adaptation erases all sense of sexual ambiguity, Clay is completely straight, Blair and Clay are a "power couple", actively resist the decadence that surrounds them, and act as potential saviors for Julian. In the film, the characters have simple moral codes, and there is a simple moral message within its story. Clay and Blair are rewarded for resisting decadence. Their relationship provides them with a connection to "traditional values", anchoring them. Because of this, they are saved from the depravity that surrounds them. Julian however, lacks this. A "normal" heterosexual relationship eludes him, and so he falls completely into decadence. The consequence of this is his death. The moral message of this is

clear. Losing sight of traditional values has tragic consequences. The tension in Ellis's novel however, comes from the opposite. There is no clear moral message in the novel. Clay's inaction is monstrous, yet is framed as inevitable. There is nothing and nowhere for Clay to go, even if he wanted to. There is nothing for him to do. There is no solution, no easy way out. While Ellis draws attention to the disenchantment and exhaustion of the modern condition, he also points out the impossibility of returning to traditional values, therefore rejecting traditional values as a solution to modern disenchantment.

The opening lines of "Less Than Zero" show Clay's narrative voice as characterized by negative language. Blair's observation about freeways "shouldn't" bother Clay, yet it fills his consciousness so that "Nothing else seems to matter". The following sentences all begin with "Not", "Not the fact...Not the mud...Not the stain...Not the tear". This use of negative language implies that the fact, the mud, the stain, the tear, should hold meaning, should matter to Clay. Their lack of meaning has to be qualified, clarified, through negative language. The word "not" drains these subjects of meaning. Through this use of negative language, Ellis creates a sense of the "should". The fact that Clay is an eighteen year old boy visiting his family for winter break should matter. The mud on Clay's jeans, the stain on his shirt, the tear in his vest, should matter. This happens because negative language, especially where "not" is the qualifying term, relies on positive language, and exists as a modification of a positive statement. "Nothing else seems to matter. Not the fact that I'm eighteen and it's December..." relies on its positive opposite, contains this opposite meaning within it, in order to negate it. The statement "Nothing else seems to matter" contains within it the phrase "Things seem to matter", and uses the negative term "nothing" to negate this meaning. Even more explicitly, "not the fact that I'm eighteen and it's December" contains within it its positive opposite "the fact that I'm eighteen and it's

December”, and using the negative term “not” in order to modify this meaning. The reader can see, explicitly on the page, the meaning being stripped from these subjects, through negative language. Ellis uses negative language in Clay’s narrative voice, to convey a loss of meaning and emotion. By using negative language, which relies on and modifies its positive opposite, Ellis shows the potential for these subjects to be sites of meaning and emotion. Through negation, these subjects are drained of this potential, mirroring how they have been drained of significance for Clay.

However, Clay’s use of negative language, conveying a loss of meaning, is in conflict with the abundance of descriptive detail within these negative phrases. “Nothing else seems to matter. Not the fact that I’m eighteen and it’s December and the ride on the plane had been rough and the couple from Santa Barbara, who were sitting across from me in first class, had gotten pretty drunk. Not the mud that had splattered the legs of my jeans, which felt kind of cold and loose, earlier that day at an airport in New Hampshire. Not the stain on the arm of the wrinkled, damp shirt I wear, a shirt which had looked fresh and clean this morning. Not the tear on the neck of my argyle vest, which seems vaguely more eastern than before, especially next to Blair’s clean tight jeans and her pale-blue t-shirt”. Clay’s statement that “Nothing else seems to matter”, is followed by a series of negative sentences all beginning with “not”. At first glance, these sentences seem simply to be a list of all the things Clay doesn’t care about, proving his initial statement. However, the amount of detail Clay uses in his descriptions implies otherwise. Clay notices there is mud “splattered” on his jeans, notices that this mud feels “kind of cold and loose” and knows that it got there “earlier that day at an airport in New Hampshire”. He notices “the stain on the arm of the wrinkled, damp shirt” he’s wearing, how his “fresh and clean” appearance has changed throughout the day. He notices “the tear on the neck” of his vest, and the way it

looks “more eastern” compared to Blair’s clothes. Apathy is marked by a lack of interest, a lack of attention. The amount of detail Clay gives to these subjects reveals that he is not completely apathetic towards them at all. For Clay to be so attentive and observant of his surroundings, conflicts with the claim that he is apathetic. This contradiction is repeated when Clay states that “Nothing else seems to matter to me but those ten words” yet immediately follows this statement with details about his surroundings “Not the warm winds, which seem to propel the car down the empty asphalt freeway, or the faded smell of marijuana which still faintly permeates Blair’s car”. This contradiction reflects an internal conflict within Clay. “It seems easier to hear that people are afraid to merge rather than ‘I’m pretty sure Muriel is anorexic’ or the singer on the radio crying out about magnetic waves”. For Clay, focusing on Blair’s banal observation about traffic in L.A, and caring only about these words, words which are insignificant, have no meaning, and stir no emotional reaction, is “easier” than confronting the reality that surrounds him. Apathy is preferable to emotionally uncomfortable topics, like the fact that his friend is anorexic, and problems that face the world at large. However, he is unable to completely extinguish his natural human emotions, and his instinct to care. All he can do is try to repress his emotions as much as possible, by avoiding expressing or acknowledging them in any way. Doing this allows him to pretend that he does not have emotions, that he does not care about anything at all. Therefore, Clay’s buried emotions and stifled sense of caring can only be expressed indirectly, through detailed observations of the world around him. Even then Clay must deny that his observations have any meaning to him, in order to minimize their connection to any emotion, or any sense of caring.

The illusion of emotional numbness is shattered in the climax of the novel, when Julian brings Clay along to see his pimp and meet with one of his clients. Clay goes along, under the

pretense that he wants back the money that Julian owes him. Julian refuses to give him his money, unless he follows “‘What’s wrong? You wanna come or not? You want your money or not?’ ‘Why does it have to be this way?’ ‘Because’ is all Julian says” (166). Julian gives no reason as to why Clay must follow him because, logically, there is none. He could easily give Clay the money after the night is over, after he has met with his client. This reveals that Julian wants Clay to come with him, wants Clay to see the dire situation he is in. Of course, Clay already has a good idea about Julian’s situation. It has been implied, through jokes and passing comments, one friend saying that Julian is “Too busy fucking Beverly Hills lawyers for money” however Julian avoids confronting these implications, “I’m about to ask her what she meant by that when suddenly, someone calls out her name...” (81). Clay wants the explicit, but only expresses passivity “Once in the car, Blair says, ‘Let’s go somewhere. Hurry.’ I think to myself, why don’t you just say it. ‘Where?’ I ask” (57). Julian’s insistence on bringing Clay along with him shows a desire to make explicit what has already been implied. Julian wants Clay to see directly, explicitly, what is happening to him. He wants to be honest with Clay, wants Clay to see him at his very worst. There is a perverse intimacy in Julian bringing Clay along with him. Within this act, Julian admits that he wants his best friend to witness his pain.

Julian cannot put this admission into words, leaves it unexplained, just “Because”. Julian as the sacrificial lamb. Strangely enough, he is the most innocent character in the story. He does not extend his depravity outwards, so much as it falls inward onto him. He is either completely absent from the scenes of the great depravity in the novel, or the victim of the depravity being depicted. Julian wants his best friend to witness his pain first hand, is he looking for a reaction within Clay, some sign that he cares, penetrating the thick film of apathy that surrounds him. Julian is searching for external intervention. Scrawled on the bathroom stall of a local bar,



“ ‘Julian gives great head. And is dead’ : ‘Fuck you Mom and Dad. You suck cunt. You suck cock. You both can die because that’s what you did to me. You left me to die. You both are so fucking hopeless. Your daughter is an Iranian and your son is a faggot. You both can rot in fucking shitting asshole hell. Burn, you fucking dumbshits. Burn, fuckers. Burn.’” (Ellis 193). This is not confirmed to be written by Julian, but is clearly framed within the novel to be in Julian’s voice, as if Julian did write it. Julian as a living testimony of his parents' failure, his struggle exposes their failure. Julian could be looking for a reaction within Clay, but could also be looking to punish Clay by making him witness his pain, as a kind of “look what you did to me” moment. But I find this a bit unconvincing. While Clay was extremely negligent towards his best friend, he was still more caring towards him than anyone else in the novel. “Why did you give me the money? Because you're my friend?” Here, Julian is trying to prove Clay’s words, give them weight.

Clay witnessing Julian’s abuse is more intimate and vulnerable than any other part of the novel. Emotions are laid bare, Clay’s monotone narration stumbles, his body betrays him.

- “ I begin to feel weak, walk around the room, search my pocket for a cigarette” (Ellis 168)
- “ Finn turns to Julian and then back at me ‘You feel alright?’ ‘Yeah’ I tell him. ‘Just have the shakes’” (Ellis 169)
- “I think Julian’s crying” (Ellis 170)
- “Julian opens his eyes and stares into mine and I turn away and notice a fly buzzing lazily over the wall next to the bed” (Ellis 175)
- “...I walk into the bathroom and lock the door and turn on both faucets in the sink and flush the toilet repeatedly as I try to throw up, but don’t” (Ellis 176)

- “ ‘You come to me a year ago with a huge debt to some dealers and I give you a job and show you off and take you around and I give you all these clothes and all the fucking coke you could snort, and what do you do in return?’ ‘I know, Shut up,’ Julian screams, choking, covering his head with his hands. ‘You act like an arrogant, selfish, ungrateful-’ ‘Fuck off, you-’ ‘-little prick’ ‘- asshole pimp’ ‘Don’t you appreciate what I’ve done for you’ Finn pushes Julian against the door. ‘Huh? Don’t you?’ ‘Stop it, you asshole pimp.’ ‘Don’t you? Answer me. Don’t you?’ ‘Done for me? You’ve turned me into a whore.’ Julian’s face is all red and his eyes are wet and I’m freaking out, just trying to stare at the floor whenever Julian or Finn looks over at me.”(Ellis 182)
- “Disappear Here. The syringe fills with blood. You’re a beautiful boy and that’s all that matters. Wonder if he’s for sale. People are afraid to merge. To merge.” (Ellis 183)

Through these emotionally wrought scenes, Clay’s body betrays him, symbolizing his natural impulses to care, to be disgusted, attempting to claw out from his veneer of apathy and nonchalance. Everyone can see that Clay is not okay, that he is troubled, deeply upset, through his physical appearance. He is pale, shaking, sick to his stomach. His body, the natural aspects of his being, are calling out in protest. They give him away. Despite his sickness, he cannot throw up. The consequences of his condition are never fully realized, brought to a conclusion. This is the climax of the story, where all the problems building implicitly come to a head, the other shoe drops, the dreaded moment happens. Implicit problems are made explicit, unable to be avoided, ignored, covered up. “What are you gonna do? You have nowhere to go. You going to tell everyone?” (Ellis 183). This moment feels inevitable, what the entire novel has been building to and dropping (pretty heavy) hints towards. Phrases from the novel are repeated. Specifically, phrases that have been inexplicably troubling and haunting to Clay. “Disappear Here... Wonder

if he's for sale...People are afraid to merge on freeways". Throughout these scenes, Clay thinks of leaving but can't pull himself away. Wants to see the worst. Repeats this mantra to himself. "I tell myself I could leave. I could simply say from the man from Maine and Julian that I want to leave. But, again, the words don't, can't, come out and I sit there and the need to see the worst washes over me, quickly, eagerly" (Ellis 175). Drugs fail him, he is running low on coke, refuses the quaalude Finn offers him. "...Open a small vial and notice that I don't have much coke left, but I do what's left of it..." (181). He cannot use these drugs to suppress the natural anymore. The depravity of their situation, their spoiled rotten condition completely exposed.

### Chapter 3: My Year of Rest and Relaxation

"My Year of Rest and Relaxation" by Ottessa Moshfegh has been one of the most significant novels published in the last ten years. More than just a commercial success, the book became a cultural phenomenon, sparking an on-going literary trend towards unhinged women in contemporary fiction, and showing that yes in fact, books can still be cool. Especially popular with young girls, the novel blew up on social media, where it was often put pictured alongside girly trinkets (like make up, perfume, lace) or a top a skillfully disheveled nightstand, with captions like "POV: you're hot" or "hot girl nightstand". In this way, "My Year of Rest and Relaxation" became an essential part of popular culture as a whole, much like Bret Easton Ellis's debut novel "Less Than Zero" in the 80's. Journalist Emma Madden points out this cultural resurgence in the aesthetics of literature and reading, becoming a popular theme in fashion, "Moshfegh herself both inspired and walked the runway for Maryam Nassir Zadeh's FW collection earlier this February during a library and literature-infused season. Zadie Smith sat front row at Loewe's showcase, Dior glittered its runway with text from Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* and Moschino physicalised and aestheticised the act of reading as models sported reading-

lamp headpieces.” The popular success of the novel is surprising, considering that it is constructed as an anti-novel, standing in stark contrast against traditional novelistic standards. Ultimately, it is a book about a woman’s quest to do nothing, with an unnamed narrator who is unashamedly cruel and privileged. Yet it has become a smashing success specifically for young girls, and as Mosfegh puts it in an interview with NPR, “it’s no secret that young teenage girls are responsible for making everything cool”. In an age where many lament the loss of reading as a common cultural activity, Ottessa Moshfegh has made reading cool again, re-establishing literature as capable of speaking to the modern cultural moment. Even among critics, this function of Moshfegh’s novel, of capturing the modern moment, and connecting with modern audiences cannot be denied. At its heart, this book is a biting criticism of the anomie of modern society, especially of those who can afford to remove themselves from the company of others. Why else make the main character so unlikeable? Why elicit such a strong response?” (Renner, LA LB).

In his essay, “Losing Track of Time”, Jonathan Greenberg analyzes Moshfegh’s use of time, as an important element in establishing her book as an anti-novel. He understands the narrator’s desire to sleep the year away, as a desire to escape time, with the narrator actively working to create conditions where she can easily lose all sense of time, rendering it irrelevant and unimportant. Greenberg goes on to show how the narrator’s rejection of time leads to a rejection of plot and action, saying: “The year of rest and relaxation thus turns out to be a chronicle of days that barely register. That is to say, in rejecting time, the novel also spurns the very action that the novel would seem to require to sustain itself” (Greenberg 192). For Greenberg, the narrator’s desire to lose time establishes *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* as an anti-novel, leading to a rejection of plot and action. In doing so, he also calls attention to the

fundamental tension of the novel, as a narrative centered on a woman's quest to do nothing, therefore resisting narrative. As Greenberg goes on to elaborate "it becomes clear that in establishing the narrator's desire to lose track of time, Moshfegh has also set a trap for her, concealing from her the paradox that annihilating time can from a certain angle look like an ambition to be achieved in time", pointing out the essential contradiction at the heart of the novel. The narrator's ultimate desire is to do absolutely nothing, yet in this quest she ends up placing herself in time, as doing nothing becomes a goal to work towards "an ambition to be achieved in time", no different than working towards a future dream job. Similarly, Moshfegh's antinovel begins to take the shape of a traditional novel, with plot and time necessarily creeping in. "It appears that in resisting what novels do, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* shows us what novels do. Being an antinovel turns out to be an-other way of being a novel. In seeking to lose track of time, the novel attunes us to our being in time; in depriving character of action, it reveals each person's be-ing as continuous with (yet not identical to) her lame memories and her not-yet- existent future" (Greenberg 200).

While Greenberg provides an insightful analysis of the function of time in the novel, especially in regards to the narrator, I disagree with his understanding that Moshfegh too, as an author, works to construct a sense of timelessness in the novel, allowing the reader to similarly lose sense of time. In fact, I argue that Moshfegh portrays the events of the novel as distinctly within time, creating a hyper awareness of time within her narrative. The story focuses on a narrator who is trying to fall into timelessness, through sleep. Yet perhaps the novel's most defining feature is its sense of timeliness. The constant pop culture references, beginning early in the novel, establish this almost immediately. This sense of timeliness is further developed through the novel's representation of the New York City art scene. Inherently, the world of

contemporary art is one that relies on “the now” for self-definition, and it is fundamentally interested in speaking to the current moment. In this way, the art world is a time-telling device, constructing human history, and putting human expression into the narrative of time. Moshfegh represents this function of the art world in her novel. The art scene that she describes overtly echoes the reality of New York’s art scene in the late 90’s. Rather than creating a hypothetical alternate art world, Moshfegh portrays an art world that mirrors reality. The art pieces, and notable artists populating this fictional world immediately call to mind prominent figures of New York’s contemporary art scene, such as Damien Hirst. Upon its release, many reviews and articles noted the connection between Ping-Xi, the character of the famous artist in the novel, to Damien Hirst, real-life darling of the 90’s New York City art scene. In later interviews, Moshfegh confirms this connection, directly citing Damien Hirst and his works as a source of inspiration for many of the fictional art pieces described. Like Hirst, Ping-Xi is a kind of rebellious art prodigy, rising to stardom in their early twenties, for controversial and highly conceptual pieces. Like Hirst, Ping-Xi’s work centers on themes of death, and the inherent value/purpose of art within the contemporary setting. One of Ping-Xi’s fictional exhibitions, a series of taxidermied dogs cut into pieces, is a direct reference to Hirst’s most famous piece, an encased taxidermied shark titled “The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Others” (1991). Through such overt references, Moshfegh encourages the reader to see this fictional art world as a representation of the real conditions, ethos, and philosophy of the New York contemporary art scene during the 90’s. In this way, the art world of the novel acts as a time-telling device, emphasizing the events of the novel as occurring within the greater narrative of time.

Still, it's important to note that despite feeling so distinct to the modern moment, the novel takes place in the recent past, not the present. In fact, the specific sense of time that is emphasized is an image of the 90's, an image of the past. All the pop culture references, the impending doom of 9/11, headlines in magazines, and images of New York City work to cement the events of the novel not only as happening in time, generally, but in time, specifically. It is this specific moment in time that is central to the narrative. Immediately, when it is revealed that the novel takes place in the 90's, in New York, Moshfegh draws upon the unique familiarity the past perspective can offer. Because it is the past, especially the recent past (one of the most significant moments in recent American history), it is familiar. They are expectations about what will happen next. These expectations are raised, the more that the novel calls attention to its specific place in time. More than direct references to time, the art world, and the greater cultural landscape depicted, steeps the narrative in a feeling of specific time. This sense of time is particularly significant in a novel where nothing much happens, further drawing attention to itself as one of the few connections to reality. Notably, the narrator is unnamed, her appearance largely unexplored outside of blonde, skinny, pretty, and WASPY. The narrative does not go out of its way to name the narrator of the story (told in first person), but it does go into great detail to place the events of the novel to curate a highly specific sense of time. Knowing what is to come, to be aware of time, is a burden, and becomes a burden to the reader. It is the source of impending doom, growing every time it is invoked. After all, the main purpose of the narrator's extreme actions is to escape reality, to lose all sense of time and place. So, these constant reminders stick out, as inconvenient. Reality, and time, is depicted as inescapable. Reva's death is inevitable, after it is revealed she will be working in the twin towers. Knowledge of what is to

come, a feature unique to past events, kills Reva before the actual event can. It is a source of negativity, of fear and dread for the reader, but it cannot be ignored or denied.

The book is very timely. By timely, I do not necessarily mean it just occurs at the perfect moment, to become a cultural phenomenon, or to speak to the modern condition. Moreso, I am using timely to describe how the events of the novel are framed as happening in time, rather than outside of it. Similarly when I speak about timelessness, I am referring to a loss or lack of time rather than permanence. The novel is timely because it is entrenched in a strong sense of time. Its central conflicts stem from this. The narrator is on a quest for timelessness, using sleeping drugs to fade out of consciousness, into a world where time loses all meaning or significance. Her love of sleep reflects a desire to detach from reality, “This was the beauty of sleep—reality detached itself and appeared in my mind as casually as a movie or dream” with time as an particularly unpleasant aspect of reality. For the narrator, sleep is state of neutrality: “I was neither scared nor elated...” and yet “I was always still me” (Moshfegh 39). She does not lose herself in sleep, but rather is able to achieve a suspended state of sleep. This shows that what the narrator desires is to be unaffected, neutral and removed from reality. Time is an obstacle towards this, an incessant reminder of painful realities that provokes a reaction within the narrator, exactly what she is trying to avoid. Recently orphaned, the past is a source of intense pain and confusion for the narrator, rather than a site of meaning or purpose. Moshfegh represents the narrator’s negative view of the past in the plot, by connecting the holidays to pain and conflict within the narrative. Reva’s mother dies on Christmas. Already, the narrator was troubled by the holidays, the decorations and yearly tradition, the emphasis on family, all disturbing reminders of her past. The death of Reva’s mother legitimizes her dread, reinforcing the holidays, and therefore the past, as a source of meaningless pain. Additionally, her relationship with Trevor ended on the



way to a New Years Eve party. Even though the narrator seems to hate Trevor, disgusted by memories of their past together, she is nonetheless deeply troubled by their break-up. She avoids all memories and reminders of him, much in the same way she avoids memories of her parents. The past is a troubling reminder of reality, through painful memories. However, this is not a new problem, specific to the contemporary moment. People have always avoided the past, and been troubled by memory. What is particular to modernity, however, is her cloudy vision of the future, as unreachable. When a co-worker casually asks about the narrator's plans after her internship is over, the narrator finds she cannot imagine any future at all. Her struggle with the narrative of time is not specific to the past, or even the future. Rather, her struggle is based on a greater inability to place herself within the narrative. She does not have a dark, hopeless vision of the future. She has no vision of the future at all. The narrator's conflict with time is a problem of narration, the narrative of time failing to give meaning or purpose to her life. Therefore, the narrator tries to reject time as a whole, neutralizing its impacts in order to exist outside of such a false narrative of meaning. She quits her job, in order to fully commit herself to the task of sleep through the year. Day or night loses any significance to her, the ultimate goal of slipping out of consciousness remains the same, regardless of time. Through this sleep haze, the narrator is placed outside of time. She stays in her apartment, only leaving to go to the local 24 hour bodega across the street, a space similarly insulated by time. However, even here she is confronted with "sensational headlines on the local daily papers...Bush vs. Gore for President", subtle reminders of time as an objective reality which continues to shape the world around her. The narrator cannot deny this, so she must exist outside of it, create a world where it is unaffected by it. Sleep is the only way to do this. During sleep, all sense of time is lost. It is the only place where this can happen. However she can only achieve such a heightened state of sleep through sleep pills, a

rejection of the real limits of sleep that is achieved through medication. In this way, Moshfegh frames the narrator's desire for timelessness as an explicit denial of reality, an appealing but ultimately delusional fantasy.

The main conflict of the novel is one of time. One way that Moshfegh represents this conflict is through the inner conflict of the narrator, who is trying to escape time. The narrator understands the source of her problems as lying within the narrative of time. In the wake of her parents' death, the past becomes a source of painful memories, a troubling reminder of tragedy instead of a source of meaning or guidance. She has nightmares about her parents, their memory literally haunting her, especially the memory of her father's sickly body, "Those dreams with him were the most upsetting. I'd wake up in a panic" (Moshfegh 63). She openly admits to the past being a source of anxiety for her, saying, "I got antsy, thinking about my past. I tried not to think of Trevor..." (Moshfegh 79). Here, she also lays bare her tactic to deal with her painful relationship with time, that being to avoid it, to suppress and deny it. Avoidance of time reinforced in her reaction to the death of Reva's mother, not wanting to go to the funeral, "tired of hearing about it. It brought back too many memories" (Moshfegh 89). It is not just the past that is a problem, but time as a whole. She cannot picture the future, saying "What next? I couldn't imagine" (Moshfegh 42). Neither can she engage in the present "I read the headlines slowly, my eyes blurring and crossing as I started" (Moshfegh 104). Therefore, the narrator loses faith in the narrative of time, as a stable site of meaning.

Moshfegh also represents time as a conflict, by setting the novel in Manhattan, the year before 9/11. The time span of the novel, already alluded to in the title, is further established by the narrator's repeated direct statements of the date. The narrator moving through time is a conflict for the reader who knows the inevitable tragedy that will occur with this passage of time.

It is primarily through this specific setting, that Moshfegh establishes her book as timely, making time a central part of the narrative. The context of a looming, age-defining tragedy, creates a heightened sense of time as valuable and limited. The reader is aware of what is to come, and the great consequences of it, and so the precious time before its effects are felt is valuable. This idea that one can escape the effects of time, politics etc, is immediately called into question “this happened in NYC, they always did, but not to me”, view as staying the same so she only needs a glimpse. The context of 9/11 makes the reader hyper aware of the passage of time, moving towards such an impactful event, showing the capacity of time to produce unexpected change. Additionally, the context of 9/11 calls the reader's attention to the totality of time, the far-reaching and unavoidable effect it has on those living within it.

While the narrator is seeking to achieve timelessness through sleep, Moshfegh establishes a strong sense of time throughout the novel, explicitly tying together the events of the novel, and the narrator's personal story, to the greater narrative of time. The pop culture references, especially to art and film, show that the novel happens within time, affected by the specific time period it is set in. Characters in the novel interact with familiar media from the 90's, but more than this, they are profoundly impacted by this media, popular culture shaping their experiences and understanding of the world. The narrator's appearance is first established as “like Wionna Ryder all of a sudden. Except you look more like Angelia Jolie. She's blonde in that”, making the 90's cult classic a part of the narrator's identity (Moshfegh 11). Her strange obsession with Whoopi Goldberg, darling of the 90's, builds on this. At first, this seems like just another pop culture reference that places the story within time. However the narrator continues to mention her love of Whoopi throughout the novel, and when she is caught in a drug fueled hallucination, slipping away from the world, it is Whoopi's hand who pulls her in and saves her from oblivion.

After this, the narrator wakes up with a renewed sense of purpose and meaning. Through Whoopi Goldberg, a symbol of 90's pop culture, her faith in narrative as a source of meaning is restored. Even her salvation from modernity's meaninglessness is distinctly timely, despite her attempts to turn to timelessness as a solution. The narrator cannot escape time, not even by escaping consciousness. Moshfegh uses pop culture references to show how one's place in time is meaningful, and significant, shaping the characters on a subconscious level.

Emphasis on beauty, and appearances. Keeping up appearances is all that matters, the narrator is disenchanted with this worship of falseness. Sleep as a kind of metamorphosis. Sleep as progress, growth. For the narrator, the only truly important thing someone can do, the only real, honest thing, is to sleep. To opt out of reality. To disengage. Everything else is a waste, just going through the motions. Inauthentically following cultural scripts. Reva's death counteracts the narrator's sense of inaction, rejecting all narratives by rejecting consciousness as valuable or healing. After a year of sleeping, she is calm, happy. Finally she sees meaning in life, in things. She wants to be a good person, and a good friend to Reva, because she sees how these things matter now. However this success counteracts the value of this realization. How can things be meaningful, and time matter, if the way of arriving at this conclusion is to waste a year? To, in the most literal sense of the world, dedicate a year to nothing? Reva dying in the 9/11 attacks, before the narrator ever has a chance to rekindle her friendship, to rectify her past cruelty, collapses the narrator's understanding of her year of sleep as ultimately successful and productive. While she is able to think fondly upon the memory of her friend, and value her authenticity instead of being disgusted by it, she is never able to repair their damaged relationship. She is never able to do right by her, something that the entire narrative has been pushing towards. Ironically, the narrator falls victim to time, her personal growth coming too late

to save the only meaningful relationship in her life. It takes the narrator the whole novel to come to the realization that “time is not immemorial”, something that the reader has been aware of from the very beginning, when the setting of the novel was established.

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