

# Culture and tension in less than zero



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Tension between a protagonist and the society in which he lives is an element of storytelling which can be found in many texts across many millennia. The story of Jesus Christ's crucifixion is a particularly notable example, though the great novels of 19th century realism also pit well-defined individuals against entire cultures. *Less than Zero* by Bret Easton Ellis is a latter-day example of such a text; Clay, its narrator and protagonist, shows persistent disaffection and apathy throughout the novel, retreating to pharmaceutical solutions, or alcohol, to manage his feelings and retain a place in society. This essay intends to discuss the ways in which that tension is displayed in *Less Than Zero*, including examination of Clay's relationships with his parents, friends, siblings, and with the wider world around him. Perhaps the most salient point with which to start is Clay's admission on page 140 that he wonders if "[he] look[s] exactly like them" (Ellis, p. 140, 1985). Almost every man in this novel is described as being blond, tan and thin, and Clay too fits those descriptors perfectly. So a big part of the tension between Clay and the society in which he lives is that he looks exactly like all the other men, and struggles to find a coherent identity (though the causative relationship between the two is unclear). His concession of this point, however, comes long after the beginning of the novel, and it is heavily undermined by what he does next: "[he tries] to forget about it and get[s] a drink and look[s] around the living room" (Ellis, p. 140, 1985). This very brief window into Clay's self-perception, vis à vis his lack of individualism within society, unsettles him and he turns to alcohol to displace this idea. It is important to remember that Clay is coming back to Los Angeles after several months away, and from the very beginning of the novel, his perspective seems to have been altered by this; so Clay's almost solipsistic thought

provides further tension between himself and society. Blair's statement that " people are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles" (Ellis, p. 1, 1985) disturbs Clay because it implies that he won't be able to merge back in with his old friends and his old life. This thought occurs to Clay several more times throughout the story, and becomes a leitmotif, along with the billboard proclaiming " Disappear Here" (Ellis, p. 30 1985). This billboard – which disturbs Clay as greatly as the ' afraid to merge' statement throughout the novel – echoes Clay's realization that he looks like everyone else, and therefore could disappear very easily into a crowd; once again, Clay seems to be subconsciously aware (and, indeed, afraid) of this whitewashing of individuality. While the uncomfortable truth of the ' afraid to merge' idea could, arguably, be written off as simply Blair's opinion, the billboard inarguably represents society; for Clay, it is a large and blatant reminder of the vacuousness and selfishness of the culture in which he grew up, and apart from which he now feels. In addition, Clay observes that " it's probably an ad for some resort" (Ellis, p. 30, 1985); that it is (likely) an ad which so effectively disturbs Clay echoes the lack of boundaries between advertisements and genuine cultural elements (i. e. music videos), on 1980s MTV.

This is another conspicuous element of culture present in the novel. MTV, which at the time showed music videos back-to-back and little else except advertisements and brief comments from veejays. At the time, it was an integral part of many young people's lives and television watching habits, and it is repeatedly mentioned in the novel. As put by Sonia Baelo-Allue in Bret Easton Ellis's *Controversial Fiction: Between High and Low Culture*, " the

world of MTV and songs is especially relevant in the novel since songs constitute the only means of communication for Clay's friends... this is also the language of the narration" (Baelo-Allue, p. 172, 2011). As Baelo-Allue states, the narration of the novel as well as all the interactions between Clay and his friends are written in a flowing, endless style which evokes that of MTV. Clay, for example, writes: " I turn on MTV and tell myself I could get over it and go to sleep if I had some Valium and then I think about Muriel and feel a little sick as the videos begin to flash by" (Ellis p. 4 1985). Here, Clay seems to be turning to MTV as a type of replacement drug, but from his tone it is clear that it is not working (even though his run-on sentences mirror the structure of MTV's programming). The tension here comes from the fact that others seem to be able to turn to it in the same way and find the entertainment which Clay seeks; Trent's maid on page 44, the boy on the couch during the party in Malibu on page 140, and many other examples. Clay, on the other hand, more than once " turn[s] on MTV and turn[s] off the sound" (Ellis, p. 62, 1985). Clay is unable to engage fully with this important cultural influence, like his friends (although often, people are shown to be high on some drug or other before watching it), and this underlines the tension between Clay and society; he cannot relate to his friends through it, nor can he relate to society in general, so this further fuels his disaffection. Similarly, while the characters are watching the snuff film towards the end of the novel, Clay is the only one to leave when the true nature of the movie becomes clear; indeed, Trent becomes aroused when watching it and even, when the verisimilitude of the tape is questioned, " defensively" (Ellis, p. 142, 1985) and " hopefully" (Ellis, p. 143, 1985) declares that it was real,

while it is quite clear that Clay would rather believe that it wasn't. In *Beyond Narcissism in American Culture of the 1980s*, by Steve Barnett and JoAnn Magdoff, it is said that "when perspectives shift, a moral order, or even a coherent sense of right and wrong, clustering around fixed underpinnings, becomes implausible" (Barnett & Magdoff, p. 419, 1986). Clay's perspective having been altered by his time away at college, he no longer exists within the same moral framework as his friends, which serves only to further distance him from them. One further point to consider here is that television of the 1980s wholly exemplifies a binary, black and white view of morality, and the viewer is always given a sense of completion when the bad guys are caught by the good guys (Barnett & Magdoff, p. 417, 1986), but without any self-awareness regarding the relativistic nature of morality. Clay's life, however, is told in a series of morally neutral vignettes in which it is impossible to get any resolution (as the storytelling reflects the endless quality of MTV's presentation at the time), and "bad" things such as Rip's abduction of a 12 year old girl go unpunished. So the tension between Clay and society is ratcheted up, since even his own social circle doesn't share his viewpoint, and this is brought into sharp relief towards the end of the novel, when Rip and Spin imprison a 12 year old girl and, along with Trent, they rape and abuse her. Although Clay leaves and is therefore not privy to those crimes, the imagery remaining in his head as he prepares to leave Los Angeles is brutal and uncompromising: "The images I had were of people being driven mad by living in the city. Images of parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled that they ate their own children" (Ellis, p. 195, 1985).

This last image is a useful one when considering Clay's social relationships, since Clay's family structure influences the tension between him and society. Firstly, his parents are divorced (and although this is not unusual among his friends, it is shown much more openly with Clay), and he admits regarding his sisters that he is unsure of their ages, and nor can he differentiate between them. His father seems to be on-hand for lending money but otherwise completely unavailable. Approaching Christmas in the novel, Clay, his mother and his sisters go Christmas shopping and his sisters "have used [their] Father's charge account to buy him... something" (Ellis, p. 15, 1985). This is a small example of the corruption of traditional family practices in Clay's family; further incidents happen when Clay goes to meet his father for lunch: he is left to wait for half an hour "while [his father] is in some meeting and then [he] asks me why I'm late" (Ellis, p. 33, 1985), and then, when approached by several business colleagues at lunch, Clay is "introduced only as 'my son'" (Ellis, p. 33, 1985). Clay is forced to take on a practically two-dimensional image in his father's colleagues' eyes; a person of no importance for whom such basic information such as a name is of no importance. Furthermore, in the conversation following this, Clay's father observes that Clay is very thin and pale, and Clay's truthful answer of "it's the drugs" (Ellis, p. 35, 1985) isn't heard by his father, whose concern over Clay's weight and pallor evaporates immediately despite being symptoms of excessive drug abuse. His mother, too, has similar values; she overhears a conversation between Clay and his two sisters in which they argue over whether or not they have stolen cocaine from his closet. Only when the song Teenage Enema Nurses in Bondage starts to play does Clay's mother intervene and say something. It is clear that this laissez-faire parenting style

has affected Clay's two sisters as well, the youngest of whom claims "I can get my own cocaine" (Ellis, p. 17, 1985). It is only natural that this kind of under-parenting would inadequately prepare children for the world, and very well might be the reason that Clay can't name his sisters and can't tell them apart. So this is the foundation upon which the tension between Clay and society is, at least partly, based, and the wellspring from which it arises.

The tension between Clay and society is based on multiple things: his dysfunctional family relationship, his dysfunctional friendships, and his poor choice of friends, many of whom (as proven by the abduction, imprisonment and rape of a 12 year old girl) seem to have taken the abandon with which they consume drugs and have sex, and let it corrupt their core moral reasoning. Clay, on the other hand, has a glimmer of self-awareness, having been outside the Los Angeles lifestyle for a few months. Thus, Clay's attempts to reintroduce himself to a society he voluntarily left are front and center in *Less Than Zero*: a title which, itself, has some light to shed on Clay's self-image and, to extrapolate, Clay's view of the vacuous and vapid world of 1980s Los Angeles.

## **References:**

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