A Critical Review of Bret Easton Ellis' *Less Than Zero.*

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Less Than Zero
by Bret Easton Ellis
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I'm asked if I want review this book on the best seller list, *Less Than Zero,* a first novel by Bret Easton Ellis; it's supposed to be about the affluent Los Angeles scene complete with drugs, sex, glittering parties and the alienation of America's contemporary youth. Sounds like something with which I'm not totally unfamiliar having lived in the inner city. The subject matter also presumably depicts the setting of Southern California in an interesting fashion. So I say, "OK, no problem." Right? But get this, Ellis is only twenty years old, a student at Bennington College in Vermont, born and raised on L.A.'s wealthy west side.

You can't blame me for being skeptical; here's this kid from Beverly Hills, his name alone reeks of money, Bret Easton Ellis; his father packs a hefty wallet and buys him anything, could even get a book published for him maybe. Maybe. I'm speculating of course, but come on, he's only twenty. He can't possibly be any good. How many Truman Capotes can you expect in one century? Besides all that, this kind of thing just cools the cockles of my predominantly green heart; I'm talking envy here, you know, jealousy, the emerald cyclops.

I wanted to hate this book so bad, I just had to read it. So I went bopping down to my local B. Dalton's figuring I'd dish out a few bucks and pick up a paperback. But it's not out in paperback yet; it's $15.95 hard cover, seventeen bucks with tax. Seventeen dollars for a book barely two hundred pages long by an unknown author. Dishing out the dough for this thing, I can remember such a profound desire, a thirst even, to take a bite out of this book and rip it relentlessly to shreds.

I know, I know, enough; get to the punchline already. Just another case of . . . "I used to hate it, 'til I ate it." Well, not exactly, but something like that. Ellis has created a work that ultimately has power and deserves attention, yet with curious choices of style and form, he forces his readers to struggle along page after page as if wading through shallow quick sand. The

book has tons of pointless dialogue delivered by characters perpetually in a drug stupor, a flat, dry tone, interchangeable scenes portraying a gluttonous life style, and virtually no plot. The big crisis in the first half of the book seems to be that our narrator, Clay, doesn't have a tan. All the characters seem to wear sun-glasses indoors, at night, and sometimes even outside when the sun is shining. One also has to put up with the stereotyped Southern California lingo, like for sure, Babes, you know, coming from characters with names like Rip, Spin, Kim, Blair and Cliff, and somehow I get the feeling that Buffy and Reginald are waiting for them all at some coffee shop on Rodeo.

Why has Ellis adopted such a style? Because he is incapable of writing any other way? Or more likely, is he attempting to match form with content? Taking a step back and looking at this work as an integrated whole, Ellis' stylistic techniques amazingly click together becoming not only justified but down right appropriate in relation to his theme. I contend that Ellis has consciously selected a gritty flat complexion for this work in order to mirror a particular life style. His use of a colorless setting, a sleepy plot, and inert characterization depicts the warped life of Southern California youth propelled into a world of hedonistic absurdity where indifference reigns and emotional connections are impossible. Nevertheless, this style raises questions that need to be addressed. Is the book engaging enough with a strong narrative drive? Will the reader resent treading through muck? In short, can Ellis make the form work?

A well done traditional plot, like a top-notch chili burger, should plead to be eaten, the reader hungrily chewing and chomping words, devouring pages, with just a bit of indigestion left over to remember it by. The plot of *Less Than Zero* hits you in the jaw like novacaine. As the book opens, we immediately meet Clay, an eighteen year old freshman at a New Hampshire college, who returns home to Los Angeles for Christmas vacation with his classmate Daniel. (There does seem to be an eerie similarity between narrator and author.) A quick calculation proves that he's been away from home for about three or four months, evidently a long time in this guy's life. On his way home from LAX, he swiftly informs his audience in a fatigued voice that, "People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles," and that, "Nothing else seems to matter." This merge motif reoccurs almost blatantly throughout the book directly representing the lack of emotional connection indicative of this L.A. scene. The rest of the plot consists of Clay and his friends moving from party to drug dealer to party to loitering in nightclubs to bedding each other to party to drug dealer to party. . . .

We have a plot here that doesn't move, doesn't change

because the life portrayed here doesn't change, is stagnant. Clay for most of the book shows indifference to what's happening, floating along with this game of life yet not really engaging in it. There is no meaning in any of this action, and as a result, pointless dialogue becomes the norm. For example, in this sequence between Clay and Blair, our narrator's ex-girlfriend, we get a lot of talk with no apparent purpose:

> "Did you feel the earthquake?" she asks.
> "What?"
> "Did you feel the earthquake this morning?"
> "An earthquake?"
> "Yes."
> "This morning?"
> "Yeah."
> "No, I didn't."
> Pause. "I thought maybe you had."

Stimulating conversation. Reading this, one may rub his chin and say, "Huh?" But once the story has been read, one may slap the side of his head and say, "Yeah." A little exaggerated perhaps, but this form seems to work, here showing specifically the distant relationship between Clay and Blair. With this type of structure repeated enough, lack of deep felt communication on the whole is demonstrated as well.

Another example, this time with Clay and his pal, Trent, a blond haired model with a perfect tan:

> Trent looks at me and says, "You don't make any sense, you know that?"
> "I make sense."
> "No, dude. You're ridiculous."
> "Why don't I make sense?"
> "Because you just don't."
> "That doesn't make sense."
> "Maybe it doesn't."
> "Jesus."
> "You're a fool, Clay," Trent laughs.
> "No, I'm not," I tell him, laughing back.
> "Yeah, I think you are. In fact, I'm totally sure of it."
> "Are you?"

The reader ends up totally sure that none of this makes sense. This banter between friends goes on for a while longer until all casual sense has vanished. The meaning, if it was ever there, gets lost in the shuffle. But this scene is so absurd, it's funny. The reader finds himself laughing, maybe nervously, during

even times of horror throughout this book. There does seem to be a certain power in this listless comic horror indicating a sense of intention on the part of Ellis.

Parallelling this dialogue structure, the meaning can also get lost in the sentence structure of this novel. At times when Ellis goes into a stream-of-consciousness-type delivery, he strings together several compound sentences as when Clay says:

> People knock on the door and I lean against it, don't do any of the coke, and cry for around five minutes and then I leave and walk back into the club and it's dark and crowded and nobody can see that my face is all swollen and my eyes are red and I sit down next to the drunken blond girl and she and Blair are talking about S.A.T. scores.

This sentence brings out the delirium of the crowd and conveys this nightclub atmosphere to a tee, and the writing itself is frank and gritty and indifferent like the people around Clay and one gets the feeling from this type of structure that Clay has more than a few things scurrying around in his head and sentences of this type can go on and on and on forever and sometimes when they're lined up one after another the effect can be quite annoying, like this. But let's not miss the point. The emotional impact of, "and cry for around five minutes," gets buried in the structure. What is really important in a sentence like this doesn't come across. Nothing seems to matter to Clay so that's what we get on the page. The bottom line seems to be that emotion, any kind of genuine feeling, goes unrecognized in this society, gets lost in a lost of trivialities.

People don't merge.

Ellis often conspicuously repeats motifs like this one.

He sets them off in individual paragraphs.

Sometimes this may be too obvious.

Yet, somehow it works, has emotional impact.

Ellis seems to lose this emotional impact, however, in his characterizations, because all of his younger characters have the same make up. They're rich kids with parents who stuff money into outstretched palms thinking that's enough. Parents, who would rather buy their children anything than deal with their problems or feelings. These kids in turn become emotional cripples knowing nothing about struggle and survival in life, and thus they turn to drugs because they can't deal with an empty reality. With drugs, primarily cocaine and heroin, they leave this realm of existence so completely that they have no idea what this world is about. It seems to be a total escape, yet in the background lurks a powerful rage and severe suffering.

Thus we see the emotional significance that Ellis loses in lack of character distinction, he gains in creating a profound feeling of group despair.

Evidence of the rage and despair can be seen in every character. Rip, Clay's drug dealer, has a penthouse in Westwood, plenty of money, drugs and friends, yet he keeps a twelve-year-old girl hand-cuffed to his bed and molests her repeatedly with whomever will join in. Muriel, a beautiful young woman with apparently a wonderful personality, is anorexic and publicly shoots up heroin at a party. Clay has the money, the brains, and evidently the good looks to go far, but through his inaction inflicts a sort of torture on Julian, a friend who turns to homosexual prostitution to cover a drug debt. The problems are there, yet none of the characters can admit this to themselves, none of them, until Clay has finally seen enough. He has had enough cocaine, enough of his friends, and enough of his downward spiral. He sobers up and can finally see this reality as it is.

Ellis chooses to show us the traumatic events leading up to Clay's turnaround by lining up pivotal action scenes, one after the other, told in the same fatigued voice as the rest of the book, with little significance. The book is a bad dream, and the nightmare only gets worse as Clay's four week vacation treads on. Clay says, "And as the elevator descends passing the second floor, and the first floor, going even farther down, I realize that money doesn't matter. That all that does is that I want to see the worst." We see Julian, haggard and frayed, engaging in humiliating pain as Clay watches. We see Clay along with his dissolute friends make fun of and manipulate a dead body in some back alley. We see Rip molest a child and shoot heroin into her veins. Clay needs to see the bottom of the barrel in almost a shock treatment before he can make the ascent back to reality. Once he's that close to the basement, he has to go the distance. Unfortunately, what should be an emotionally packed series of events comes across flat and unfelt.

What Ellis does do well is to create such an unappealing narrator in Clay and still keep us sympathetic. This becomes especially necessary when Clay finally confesses out loud, "I don't want to care. If I care about things, it'll just be worse, it'll just be another thing to worry about. It's less painful if I don't care." The reader sees concretely what Ellis has embedded in his characterization, that Clay is aware of what's happening around him and that he's the only salvageable character in the book. Clay leaves Los Angeles and goes back to school on the East coast, but his classmate Daniel decides he wants to stay. The fact that Clay leaves and Daniel stays is pivotal, showing how Daniel becomes a victim while Clay rejoins society.

Clay leaves the Los Angeles area, a setting that Ellis chose to depict in dull flat terms, one of the most questionable choices of style discussed so far. Why, when Southern California is actually a place of sunshine and overabundant vegetation, paint a picture of this area so sparsely with almost anorexic characteristics parellelling those of the character Muriel? Southern California represents more than a setting.

Think back in time through our United States history before this country graced North America and remember that the original 13 colonies were settled by a good number of people who weren't satisfied in Europe. California was in turn settled by those unhappy on the East coast. This area is thus the land of the unsatisfied, filled with people unwilling to commit themselves to anything. Is it that too many of us refuse to narrow the scope of possibilities, that we want too much thoughtless mobility? Probably. Ellis seems to suggest yes. Here in L.A. freedom is supreme and social controls hardly exist. People will do and can do anything especially if money is prevalent, and this just makes so many things meaningless. Ellis' character, Clay, escapes all this by leaving; the price to pay for freedom is evidently too high.

There is a lot more to this book than may be readily apparent in a mere surface reading. Minor nonsensical details make sense if understood in relation to the whole work. Such as the sunglasses everyone seems to wear in odd places for no reason; perhaps these characters are hiding from the world, themselves. Or Clay's lack of a tan; maybe his pale skin separates him from the group, makes him an outsider.

Ellis does seem to have a method to his madness. Though the book has its share of problems, some of them severe, the work shows a certain amount of courage on the part of our author because he took a chance on a concept and came close to a powerful first work. Ellis, to a degree, succeeds in matching form with content and makes a relevant statement. The risk he has taken, especially with a first novel, makes the effort worthwhile and ultimately an accomplishment.