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Accommodation, and Assimilation in The Great Gatsby and Less
Than Zero**

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“YOU CAN DISAPPEAR HERE WITHOUT KNOWING IT”: EXCESS,
ACCOMMODATION, AND ASSIMILATION IN *THE GREAT GATSBY* AND *LESS THAN*

ZERO

by

JEREMY SIMPSON

Under the Direction of Christopher Kocela, PhD

ABSTRACT

This work discusses the protagonists, economic situations, and investigation of youth in *The Great Gatsby* and *Less Than Zero* within the context of Jean Piaget’s cognitive psychological terms “accommodation” and “assimilation.” Assimilation highlights the amoral activities and economics beholden to most members of society in the novels, while accommodation allows a voice amongst the turmoil to clash and express a clear vision of how society should be for the sake of others, maintaining agency, and producing an intelligent and stable populace. By inspecting the use of age in *The Great Gatsby* and the symbolism behind tanning in *Less Than Zero*, readers are introduced to protagonists who embody the Piagetian dynamic of accommodation in an otherwise assimilative society. I bridge these novels, eventually discussing what further work can be done through a Piagetian lens. I aim to show how this theory may be utilized in literature to dissect human nature, be it through economic excess or the critique of modern culture in retrospect.

INDEX WORDS: Tanning, Jean Piaget, *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Less Than Zero*, Bret Easton Ellis, Economic excess, Assimilation, Accommodation, Ronald Reagan, Generation X, Jazz Age, Reagan Era

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JEREMY SIMPSON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2020

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by

JEREMY SIMPSON

Committee Chair: Christopher Kocela

Committee: Christopher Kocela

Audrey Goodman

Paul Schmidt

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Services

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to a number of individuals, but wish to namely express gratitude toward the following:

To my late father, Thomas Keith Simpson, whose memory inspired my persistence, drive, and voice in this effort.

To my mother, Judith Simpson, for her love, support, and my inherited genetic disposition to obsess over literature.

To my brothers, Jonathan and Andrew Simpson, for their wisdom, criticism, guidance, and respect in my endeavors.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The 1920s and the 1980s, often regarded as the “Jazz Age” and the “Reagan Era” respectively, were decades that saw awesome changes to a boom economy. While the Banana Wars occurred across the 1920s and Central American conflicts such as the invasion of Grenada were peppered through the 1980s, these decades are the only periods of the twentieth century in which the United States did not participate in a major lasting international war effort.¹ Instead, they were periods that followed colossal global offensives—World War I and Vietnam—and left the nation consumed with accumulating wealth and heightening potential for personal financial gain. The rampant economy of the early 1920s saw such a rise in industry and capital that food was being supplied substantially faster than demand and caused a sharp decline in prices (*Empire of Wealth* 301). The primary supplier of food in the 1980s, Walmart, experienced growth at a level sufficient to earn its owner, Sam Walton, the title of the world’s richest man in 1988 with a net worth of \$6.7 billion (417). To be on the Forbes 400 list in 1982, one needed to be worth at least \$92 million, while in 1988 one needed to possess a value of at least \$225 million. This goes beyond any sort of inflation and instead demonstrates the wealth creation and excess frequently associated with Reagan’s presidency over a society perpetually on the cusp of collapse.

The economic practices of the Reagan era saw the national debt grow from “34.5 percent of GDP in 1980” to “58.15 percent [in 1990] and climbing rapidly” (*Empire of Wealth* 416). Likewise, the thriving stock market of the 1920s produced “an inordinate desire to get rich quickly with a minimum physical effort” that few at the time anticipated to be as problematic as

¹ See “America’s Wars.” This statement is in comparison to the wars that occupied surrounding decades, including militarized involvement in the Spanish-American War (1898-1902), World War I (1914-1918), World War II (1939-1945), The Korean War (1950-1953), The Vietnam War (1964-1975), and Desert Storm (1990-1991). The World War dates have been adjusted to their inception rather than American involvement to reflect the aspect of a global event occurring in the decade.

it became (Galbraith 3). The economy picked up so quickly that by 1925 Herbert Hoover expressed his concern over the rise in speculation that lay before the nation; in such an economy of public and private over-investment, industries would have their needs met since, as John Galbraith puts it regarding capitalism, “where a real demand exists it does not go long unfilled” (18). Such fulfillment is blinding in a population, and economists have suggested that “[a]ll people are most credulous when they are most happy” in the context of economic vitality (23). In this context, one could suggest that people accumulating money may be convinced by bankers that there is more to be made, thus increasing the fragility of the system.

In this way, moral decision-making and cognitive understanding of repercussions or reactions seem to be stunted in these periods of rapid economic growth. The ability to make substantial financial gains outweighed other facets of life, and cultural investments, be they cheap, accessible liquor in the 1920s or televised entertainment in the 1980s, became a distraction from the more negative impacts of capitalism on common life. Two literary texts that engage with these forms of distraction and also indict, on moral grounds, the economic situations which they depict are F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less Than Zero* (1985). Fitzgerald’s masterpiece revolves around the life of Nick Carraway, a young Yale graduate who sees the world through new eyes upon engaging with distant cousin Daisy and her husband Tom Buchanan. Nick’s introduction to Jay Gatsby drives a very uneasy narrative fueled by passion, nostalgia, and excess, all the while introducing readers to a very realistic image of the economic qualities of the 1920s. Ellis’s novel weaves a similar criticism of excess, telling the nightmarish yet relatable story of Clay, a student who returns from his first semester of college in New Hampshire to his home in Los Angeles over Christmas break. He rekindles his relationships with ex-girlfriend Blair, model Trent, and estranged best friend Julian,

all the while witnessing horrendous acts that are violent, sexual, and yet indicative of the economy of the times.

A review written by R. Galland, which was recently discovered in American scholarship, indicates that *The Great Gatsby* features “[m]uch fast-paced action, breathless and chaotic, a lot of cocktails, empty conversations, racing about without purpose, gratuitous violence, punches, beatings with revolvers, and, hovering over the whole, an immense emotional boredom of a young society prematurely spoiled by mechanization and excess of dollars” (Eisenhauer 50).² While this description accurately examines aspects of *The Great Gatsby*’s edgier material, it could also fit as a description of *Less Than Zero* were the review written in 1985 rather than 1927. An interesting point here is that the novels, separated by sixty years, contain very similar tones and themes—particularly the dereliction of youth as a symptom of excess wealth.³ Both novels pit such troubled youths as first-person narrators against a society that wishes them to think in a particular manner and to consider a sentiment similar to one Galbraith establishes: “Perhaps it [is] worth being poor for a long time to be so rich for just a little while” (42). The actions set in 1920s New York and 1980s Los Angeles society, which involve questing toward a singular vision of individual gain while damaging the lives of others and disregarding the consequences of such actions, provide insight into psychological perspectives which Jean Piaget labels “assimilation” and “accommodation.”⁴

² See Eisenhauer, p. 49. This review was discovered in *Gallica*, a recent limited index supplied by the French National Library that was sponsored by the likes of international ambassadors as well as Henri Bergson and John Galsworthy. It is one of the few known Fitzgerald critiques from France at the time of *The Great Gatsby*’s release.

³ For commentary on wealth, see Richard Godden, “Bret Easton Ellis, *Lunar Park*, and the Exquisite Corpse of Deficit Finance,” p. 597. Godden asks, “[w]hat if the treasure [of hard money] was risk, and risk a deficit-based, electronically registered form of liquidity?” If risk is what backs currency, much like the markets of the 1920s and the 1980s, one may find the behavior and invincible attitudes of the characters, all of whom surrounded by capital, as symptomatic of this element of financial value.

⁴ “A Brief Biography of Jean Piaget,” *Jean Piaget Society* – Jean Piaget (1896-1980). Swiss-born psychologist whose primary research found that “the growth of knowledge is a progressive construction of logically embedded structures superseding one another by a process of inclusion of lower less powerful logical means into higher and

Assimilation and accommodation are terms that possess their own definitions and value in the context of culture and immigration.⁵ Such “immigrant assimilation” was discussed by Mary C. Waters and Tomás R. Jiménez, a term claimed by the authors to summarize “the economic, linguistic, social, and spatial incorporation of the foreign-born” (107). The authors look at American assimilative practices, such as language patterns and intermarriage; their findings are insightful, given the realization that third-generation Mexicans, in their research, did not speak Spanish and that native-born Americans have higher rates of intermarriage than foreign-born citizens (110). This is important information in the context of Piaget’s terms because the cultural assimilation that Waters and Jiménez discuss is founded on the principles of influencing foreign minds to remove engrained culture in order to find belonging in a new society. This assimilative sense of belonging represents a form of authority in which the various components of the American melting pot are amalgamated into a singular vision of cultural identity.

Piaget was aware of and responding to these definitions and perspectives of assimilation, though the context of cultural identity was more intricately discussed by some American voices of his time. While there are global histories of cultural assimilation due to the conquering and conversion of native individuals, this interaction between American culture and these terms is rich due to the many sociological perspectives applied to the nation’s behavior and reasoning regarding assimilation. Beneficial foundational commentary on the American cultural perspective of assimilation is found in the works of Henry Pratt Fairchild and Milton M. Gordon,

more powerful ones up to adulthood. Therefore, children's logic and modes of thinking are initially entirely different from those of adults.”

⁵ For a general understanding of the terms, see the OED definitions of “assimilate, v.”: “To make like” (1a); “To be or become like” (2a); and “To become of the same substance; to become absorbed or incorporated into the system” (8a). The OED defines “accommodation, n.” as “Adaptation; the process of being adapted” (1).

both contemporaries to Piaget. Fairchild addresses the state of immigrants in America, claiming that they must be susceptible to assimilation and have it properly enacted upon them for full integration into the culture. From this perspective, said immigrants must associate with people who are forces of assimilation so that, as is stated to be the goal of the assimilative actions, “[a]ll trace of diverse origin [will be] completely lost” (Fairchild 138). Gordon builds on the power of these assimilative actions, claiming that they have been propagated by the American government’s failures. Due to the authority power’s lack of devotion to the “problems of social structure and long-range social structural goals in the United States, it may safely be presumed that the American public as a whole has devoted even less” (*Assimilation in American* 18). These foundational works situate assimilation as a destructive force when employed in the cultural context, and this acculturation from neglect, as well as the lack of intervention by the government and the populace, has provided a consistent theme in American scholarship regarding the treatment of the cultural other.

The assimilation of Native Americans is perhaps the most striking example of this acculturation, born as a crusade to reform the perceived lack of civility in the community. Such reform was so forcibly enacted that, as Joseph B. Herring notes, “native Americans became active participants in their own acculturation process” (105). Piagetian assimilation similarly touches on the internal and individual, but rather than imposition by a state authority in the form of governmental enforcement, this assimilation, in the context of my argument, is spawned by common cultural exchanges and the passive ramifications of legislation and economics. Piaget’s work gives the words more abstract meanings that bear significance in the context of social decision-making and pressures

The following chapters will refer to the Piagetian terms assimilation and accommodation in the context of his approach to cognitive development. Assimilation in this instance is the process by which “new information is incorporated into an already existing cognitive structure,” and occurs due to the inability of characters to mentally move beyond their environment and think for themselves in terms of moral development and abstract logical reasoning (“Piagetian theory”). Accommodation, then, is the process by which “already existing structures are changed to [accept or work with] new information,” which is to say that in the context of the novel, moral and logical complexity is required in order to overcome self-destructive behavior and scenarios and the disaffection or sometimes force of others to keep an individual from challenging schemas.⁶ Assimilation is not something that is bad, but is actually necessary for the proliferation of human intelligence in children and is helpful to provide context and introduce reoccurring experiences in life. While this is the case, in regard to characters who are morally corrupt or swayed by a society and existing cognitive structure of excess, assimilation could act as a plateau of cognitive development that does not allow a critical understanding of social obstacles and ways to overcome them.

This analysis requires some liberties to be taken with Piaget’s accommodation and assimilation, particularly in their application in my perspective compared to Piaget’s use. Accommodation being the restructuring of a mentality to embrace new information and assimilation being the incorporation of new information without changing one’s mindset, the terms represent two necessary aspects of learning and cognitive development that humans must experience. However, I am extending these terms and contextualizing them on multiple levels, prominently viewing assimilation and accommodation as passive acceptance and active defiance,

⁶ See OED, “Schema, n.” Definition 1b: “*Neurology and Psychology*. An automatic, unconscious coding or organization of incoming physiological or psychological stimuli, giving rise to a particular response or effect.

respectively, of cultural mentalities that are amoral or lack strong evidence of providing proliferation. These terms and Piaget's theory are perhaps the most promising untapped perspective of analysis for periods of amorality and exuberance, and in allowing for an effective examination of characters with some concessions and modifications that do not dismantle the essence of Piaget's terminology, I believe that the findings can be enriching and would only benefit theoretical approaches to characters, authors, and perhaps sculpting the literary zeitgeist of a period.

Therefore, in this thesis I am adapting Piaget's terms to extend into literary criticism and provide proper context for the examination of characters in *The Great Gatsby* and *Less Than Zero*. Beyond merely adapting Piaget's terms, I will involve the core of cognitive development in the theory that is monitored through "Piagetian tasks," which involve the completion of different exercises of object permanence, perspective, and inclusion of class ("Piagetian task"). My adaptation of Piaget's terms will extend the nature of his tasks, in tandem with the meaning and context of assimilation and accommodation, to criticize literature by showing how characters are succeeding or failing to achieve development. By doing so, Piagetian theory can be accessible in a new dimension of analysis, making the wealth of potential for such a theoretical perspective to be presented. In my reading, assimilation and accommodation help define these characters' inability, and often lack of desire, to find agency beyond the trends and activities in their environments. While Piagetian theory is used in education and the *teaching* of literature in terms of linguistics, it has been neglected as a potential perspective for the critical inspection of a literary text. I aim to show the benefit of including Piagetian theory in critical discussion of coming-of-age novels that depict the strong environmental influence on those characters yet to achieve adult moral and logical operation.

While referring to childhood development, this perception of Piagetian analysis considers a lingering excess and a lack of moral or cognitive development as characters approach and transition into adulthood. *Less Than Zero* and *The Great Gatsby* are perfect novels to introduce such a theoretical framework; Ellis's novel focuses on the political, economic, and physical identity compromised in a media-saturated world, while Fitzgerald has characterized his work as a non-traditional bildungsroman critiquing America as it traversed its "greatest, gaudiest spree" ("Early Success" 87). As I will argue, understanding Clay's trajectory from assimilation to accommodation in Ellis's novel illuminates the perspective focused on the range of moral pitfalls suffered by his generation, while Nick's accommodation in *The Great Gatsby* contrasts with the damaged society he lives in, highlighting its excess and the inability of characters such as Gatsby, Tom, and Daisy to adapt beyond the constraints of group-think.

These novels related to their audiences when they were published, but when viewing them from a comparative standpoint there is much that both works share beyond their initial social appeal. Both novels have been banned in some capacity, and while *Less Than Zero* is certainly a more violent and disturbing novel than *The Great Gatsby*, both provide tales of moral and cognitive development from the perspectives of characters battling through problematic elements of society that are relatable to audiences.⁷ A recent article by Andrew Newman, though specifically referring to *The Great Gatsby*, agrees that the cultures of the 1920s and 1980s, when viewed together, highlight "troubling mixed messages about wealth and morality" in the periods (209). Approaching Fitzgerald's novel from a pedagogical perspective, Newman addresses the inability for students to access it due to themes of upper-class life diluting any deeper meaning.

⁷ For Ellis's banned books, see Clare Willis, "Faculty and Staff's Favorite Banned Books: Part 4." For *The Great Gatsby*'s ban, see Emily Rosezella Garrity, "When Books are at War: ft. The Great Gatsby." For modern instances of censorship involving beneficial and relatable material, see Charles Bramesco, "Eighth Grade's R rating deters actual 8th-graders from seeing it. What a shame."

To combat this, the application of Piagetian assimilation and accommodation will, I hope, allow a stronger bond between reader and text. Every reader experiences cognitive development, and the most vulnerable point—fighting one’s self to develop a morally justified perspective—is the territory on which Fitzgerald and Ellis set their texts. For example, one commonality between these novels emerges in the fact that both contain scenes in which their chief protagonists encounter a perspective-shifting billboard which provokes a crucial step toward accommodation. The protagonists seem to become aware of themselves upon seeing these billboards and use this self-awareness to negotiate more troubling moments, as when Clay witnesses the gang rape of a twelve-year-old girl and Nick experiences Gatsby’s murder and the lack of care from others in his world. Both protagonists are ultimately led to reflect on their environments in fairly critical ways. These reflections lead, in the final moments of both novels, to a new view of “home.”

In my first chapter, I will examine *The Great Gatsby* and Nick’s role as an agent of accommodation in a society that is almost entirely assimilative and characterized by resisting moral development. The ages of the characters, particularly Tom, Gatsby, and Nick, reflect a transitory period—before the age of thirty—in which the ability to transcend assimilation’s dark trappings ceases. Nick, by contrast, is an accommodative body through the novel, and thus is capable of reflecting on the problematic society and figures who surround him. Fitzgerald seems to deliver the message to readers that the excessive environment is all-encompassing and must be combatted by finding moral and cognitive agency.

In my second chapter I will examine the theme of tanning in *Less Than Zero* as evidence of the beginnings of assimilation from a Piagetian perspective. The dangerous quality of Generation X’s America—fueled by drug addiction, abhorrent sexual and needless violence, and a complete lack of value for life beyond immediate self-gratification—is only able to proliferate

due to the economic excess of Ellis's time period. To examine the psychological aspects of this excess and Generation X's problems and mentality from the novel's perspective, I will apply the concepts of Piagetian assimilation and accommodation. Clay's friends and family maintain a sense of assimilation and make an effort to persuade Clay to rejoin the environment, initially by continuously reminding him about his lack of a tan. Clay is able to achieve accommodation upon the novel's conclusion due to a shift in perspective and the development of a moral compass, logical consideration of a viable future, and by comprehending the doomed paths being taken by his friends.

The sixty years between publication of *The Great Gatsby* and *Less Than Zero* saw enormous changes in politics, critical approaches, culture, and media, but the state of the nation's youth, its need to find a mask for reality, and the excess of the political system were reflected in almost equal volume. The novels that deal with American social bodies today, or those published in 2045—sixty years following the release of *Less Than Zero*—will likely contain similar themes of disaffection and fiscal excess. Examining the assimilative and accommodative qualities of a text and its characters will only spawn further connections between novels, generating conversations regarding regional American beliefs and bringing national literature together with a new perspective and theoretical approach. Piagetian criticism, when used as a tool to understand psychological and sociological aspects of the setting, plot, and characters in a novel, is a tool that can inspire new perspectives on older or lesser known material. Fitzgerald's and Ellis's consummate American novels identify the issues of excess that stifle the advancement of youth and cripple all forms of feeling among the youngest generation. In short, *The Great Gatsby* and *Less Than Zero* feature characters that must adapt to their environment but frequently do not have the tools to do so.

Throughout my chapters, I will perform a comparative analysis of Piagetian aspects in both novels to reaffirm the potential of applying such a critical approach. My new theoretical framework works well to link and consider American literature that critiques excess and economic practices. I also hope to show that these novels are not done being analyzed. There is a wealth of material in both novels that has not yet been adequately discussed, and a Piagetian critical framework can help illuminate this material.

2 “JUST SHY OF THIRTY”: EXCESS AND PIAGETIAN DEVELOPMENT IN *THE GREAT GATSBY*

Social practices as depicted in Fitzgerald’s great American novel elegantly reflect the excess and distracted mentality of the time period. There is a pursuit of the American Dream that exists at the core of the novel, which also seems to be what drives the novel’s narrator, Nick Carraway, to leave his three-generation Minnesota wealth to attain a self-discovered fortune through bond sales. This move from the middle-west to the east was made by Gatsby just a few years prior, which suggests to the reader that the eponymous character’s wealth was accumulated quickly due to the booming market of the 1920s, enabling success through various dubious practices ranging from bootlegging to the stock offerings of the bustling exchange. Stephen Brauer suggests that the achievement of the 1920s was in fact entirely economic, finding that “success [was] defined in economic and not moral terms” (53).⁸ Though the city of New York has been economically developed in such a way by greed, industry, and transportation, Gatsby depicts its assimilative qualities through Gatsby’s parties, which attract people from across the metropolis.⁹ Even linguistically, Gatsby’s use of the term “old sport” bridges various areas of the city by linking the upper and lower classes. Elyse Graham and Jon Heggstad explain that the term “old sport,” exclusively and continuously used by Gatsby in Fitzgerald’s novel, was initially coined by New York’s lower classes (414). The authors suggest that Fitzgerald’s inclusion of the term may be intended “as a vestige of [Gatsby’s] much humbler beginnings

⁸ This includes Prohibition’s supposed morality. According to “Federal Stage Set for Dry Law Entry Tomorrow,” the writer’s reaction to Prohibition is driven by an angered financial remark that the government would lose between \$400 million and \$500 million during the period that the law was in place (45). From a point independent of finance, Luc Sante mentions that Prohibition was comparable to and occurred along with raids that targeted political radicals of foreign birth and shortly followed by acts that aimed to reduce Jewish and Asian immigration (5).

⁹ See Kathleen Parkinson, *Critical Studies: The Great Gatsby*, p. 12. Fitzgerald knew of excess through firsthand experience, hosting raucous parties for members of the wealthy class that “sometimes [went] on for several days” at his Long Island home.

and... a reminder to the reader that no matter how hard he strives, Gatsby is destined to fail” (415). Such failure is signified not only by his inability to attain his dream, but also by his inability to accommodate.

In this chapter I will show how *The Great Gatsby* supports and is supported by a Piagetian reading. Such a reading works in tandem with other critical psychological approaches to the novel, and further builds on their foundation to detail what it is that Nick and the surrounding characters experience. Frederick L. Rusch approaches *The Great Gatsby* within the context of Erich Fromm’s social psychological theory, which posits that human needs hinge on freedom and belonging. This is a fitting companion to Piaget’s work given the freedom of accommodation and true sense of belonging that it provides against the guise of choice and community in assimilation. As well, Tony McAdams employs Lawrence Kohlberg’s theories of moral development, which reflect a similar line of thought to that of Piaget’s model regarding the importance of age and education in cognitive progression. Here, McAdams expresses that Nick is “virtually the embodiment of Kohlberg’s conception of moral growth as he gains increased moral maturity via the intellectual dissonance that leads to moral adjustment” (655). While the article provides a brief exploration of such a connection, my labelling of Nick as an accommodative body and thus delving into a more critical look at the specificity of his moral growth further builds the argument that he accomplishes the agential adjustment needed to survive and find freedom in society.

A reading through the lens of Piaget’s cognitive development is important because it unifies many recent scholarly perspectives on Gatsby, Nick, and the novel as a whole.¹⁰ I will

¹⁰ From the 2018 Judith P. Saunders chapter “The Great Gatsby: An Unusual Case of Mate Poaching” which discusses “evolutionary logic” and Darwinian application of self-deception existing in Gatsby, Tom, and Nick’s pursuits (138) to a more thorough examination of vehicles and the “dynamics of mobility and immobility fundamentally sustain[ing] the structure of the novel” in Yasuhiro Takeuchi’s 2016 article “Gatsby’s Green Light as

begin by showing the assimilative scenarios and accommodative reactions of Nick Carraway, reflecting on his character as a positive agent in the midst of tumult. Then I shall explore Fitzgerald's depiction of how wealth traps youthful qualities, including cognitive development, through his emphasis—stated in essays and suggested in the novel—on how reaching the age of thirty marks the end of the potential to accommodate. I will conclude by explaining with significant textual examples how *Gatsby* forms the personification of Piagetian assimilation and I will discuss the social and interpersonal implications of such a representation. I aim to show in this section that though “civilization's going to pieces,” a Piagetian reading can reveal perspectives that cross generational and theoretical gaps and show a strong, progressive line in the application of the theories to further American texts (*Gatsby* 17).

In this morally turbulent and hedonistic period rife with fraud and bribery, Fitzgerald was able to connect to a sense of national thought.¹¹ In Fitzgerald's self-reflection, he considers that the 1920s “flattered him and gave him more money than he had dreamed of, simply for telling people that he felt as they did” (“Echoes” 13). This understanding of post-war America and its people is explicitly addressed in Fitzgerald's essay and is also directly represented in his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*. Fitzgerald's voice reflects that his generation is “destined finally to go out into that dirty gray turmoil to follow love and pride; a new generation dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success; grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken” (*Paradise* 239). There is a desire for direction, and this aggravation shared as a national mentality is also made evident early in *The Great Gatsby*.

a Traffic Signal: F. Scott Fitzgerald's Motive Force” (199), recent studies that have stake in the mental, the social, and the objectal can all be brought together for a singular overarching discussion with the Piagetian conversation of assimilation and accommodation.

¹¹ See Kathleen Parkinson, *Critical Studies: The Great Gatsby*, p. 13. Many federal administrators were involved in fraud and bribery while local politicians and police forces rallied for “control over prostitution and gambling empires.”

In Nick's perspective, his return from war to the United States included a feeling "that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever" (6). This moral attention drives Nick's clear mentality through the novel, which prompts E. Fred Carlisle to refer to the protagonist as a "historian: the man who is looking back on an experience that he finally understands" (352). A Piagetian lens would further this perspective, indicating that the order that Nick has established for himself and the ability to view the past with full understanding and agency as evidence of his accommodation and the achievement of moral and cognitive development. Such an argument is supported by Peter Lisca, who claims that Nick is generally seen as "a paradigm of order and decorum almost inviolable," but the use of Piaget's terminology more aptly places the character as representative of the generation which does not wish to see America ruined by excess and self-obsession (18).

Nick expects national accommodation since he had to accommodate and adapt in WWI, but is met with a morally and cognitively challenging society which partakes in activities of excess that transcend Nick's familiarity—even coming from a wealthy family.¹² The moral neglect that Nick sees in society, which is a strong indication of assimilation's grasp, certainly penetrates through Gatsby's performance as an "Oxford man" from a deceased, upper-class, middle-west family. Nick, who has an eye for falsified tradition, points out the differences in his perception of how things should be compared to the activities of those such as Gatsby and the Buchanans, who "have broken their traditions in many ways" (Lisca 22). In this way, Gatsby has broken his past self and has arrived at what Lisca suggests is "a background fantastic and illogical." Once more, this perspective can be built upon by employing an assimilative approach

¹² Nick is passive, often delicate, and somewhat innocent in terms of his social engagements: he vaguely and supposedly breaking up with an "old friend" because of the rumor of their marriage and had only "been drunk just twice in [his] life" (*Gatsby* 24, 33).

to Gatsby's excess. The very core of Gatsby's rise to riches provides an assimilative American Dream that is a reflection of excessive capitalism and promotes the idea that any American may capture such obscene personal wealth. Fitzgerald understood the mentality of Americans and his partying in the French Riviera gave him insight into the behaviors and privileges of the care-free upper class.¹³ As Rafael Acosta Morales notes, Fitzgerald caught onto privilege's problematic nature, and "the taste of it became sour to [Fitzgerald's] palate" (97). Knowing of this excess, he understood the potential for the market to collapse via the greed of men, and this reading gives credence to his knowledge of not only the American economic system but of the American people.

This knowledge extends primarily to a specific group within Fitzgerald's generation, however. When Nick discusses Gatsby's first time with Daisy, he explains that "Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves" (157). No doubt Gatsby learned this over years of dealing with some of the wealthiest people in New York City, but even when he met Daisy, he had already encountered Dan Cody, the man-child captain of the *Tuolomee* whose youthful spirit nearly led him to his demise multiple times.¹⁴ I believe that this financial trapping of youth can be situated in the Piagetian context given how moral and cognitive development is very much disturbed by money. While there is aimless roving and assimilative behavior performed at some point by all principle characters in Fitzgerald's novel, a key piece to this perspective that unifies discussion of morality, excess, and authorial

¹³ See Scott Donaldson, "Fitzgerald's Political Development," pp. 193-94. Fitzgerald had developed the mentality that "in the United States the pursuit or possession of great amounts of money led to cruelty and wickedness." Such a mentality is reflected in perspectives on the war effort and the ability to become a demagogue in *The Beautiful and the Damned* and "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" respectively. His intuition regarding social issues of Americans was well regarded—especially around the time he was writing *The Last Tycoon*—and Fitzgerald had an expressed interest in Marx given his reportedly "confirmed leftist, anti-Stalinist but Marxist-oriented" sentiments (211-12).

¹⁴ Cody's recklessness and alcoholic sprees may be the novel's indictment of the underdeveloped mentalities of the wealthy.

relationship is in Fitzgerald's indication that the age of thirty is when the ability of the wealthy to develop accommodative abilities is cut off. Nick is the only one who notices this transitory age, which further implies that, by virtue of his accommodative nature, he is able to see the important connection between youthful endeavors and the moral and mental development needed to live as an independent agent. Nick sees those in his circle and knows that they are doomed to a life that is without moral or personal development.

Fitzgerald's narrative emphasis on the age of thirty is in a way predictive of events in his own life. While the author was twenty-seven when writing the novel and potentially questioning what the conclusion of his twenties—and shortly after, the Roaring Twenties—would bring him, it is unclear how much his representation of age is founded on Zelda's life. Unlike Fitzgerald's first two novels, *The Great Gatsby* does not contain a character that is specifically representative of Zelda. Instead, Fitzgerald includes an acknowledgment of his characters' ages and their inability to adapt to and understand the environment around them. This is important because the characters, specifically those approaching and beyond thirty—Jordan, Tom, Daisy, and Gatsby—are set in their ways of moral and cognitive belief. In an almost prognostic nature, Fitzgerald identifies a particular age as the core in *The Great Gatsby* that reflects the time trajectory of Zelda's life. When she was “just shy of 30, after a decade of nonstop rebellion, she cracked” and was committed to a mental asylum (Jenkins 84). After a long period of excessive popularity and hardcore party culture, Zelda was unable to remain mentally stable. Zelda importantly provided Fitzgerald with much material for his work, and the essence of *The Great Gatsby* may be found in the striking quote that is set beneath the über-flapper's high school graduation picture in her yearbook: “Why should all life be work, when we all can borrow? Let's think only of today, and not worry about tomorrow” (Cline 38). Perhaps Zelda was so involved in this lifestyle that it

ruined her ability to accommodate, keeping her in various mental institutions until her death in 1948.¹⁵ Had Fitzgerald understood his wife's mental disarray, this outside glance at Zelda may have produced Nick's vision and thus an intense questioning of what wealth does to age. Zelda's experiences surrounding turning thirty establish a narrative in which the morally malleable characters Jordan and Daisy need their direction changed in order to accommodate, and the post-thirty Tom and Gatsby are unable to alter their path of assimilative behavior.

According to Jordan, she and Daisy are respectively twenty-two and twenty-four years old in the novel and are the youngest primary characters; their perspectives fit this concept of malleability prior to the age of thirty (*Gatsby* 79). Since wealth causes youth to linger beyond teen years in Fitzgerald's concept, the assimilative nature of these characters is understandable. Nick's dissection of Jordan clearly defines her nature when he states that she "instinctively avoided clever shrewd men and now [Nick] saw that this was because she felt safer on a plane where any *divergence from a code* would be thought impossible" (63). In Piaget's terms, such divergence is accommodation, a change in the moral and cognitive framework that she has become accustomed to. Jordan wants control and is self-admittedly "careless," which leads to her aloofness in her romantic relationship with Nick that hardly seems to be as intimate as she believes it to be. Prior to Nick rejecting Jordan's advances after Tom outs Gatsby as a bootlegger, Jordan seems to have been in love with Nick. Though characterized as a woman of sincere personal independence, she allows herself to exist outside of the norm in this instance and thinks for herself about what she wants from the relationship rather than what society projects to be the proper lifestyle for a woman of the time.

¹⁵ For specifics on the Zelda's death, see Nancy Milford, *Zelda: A Biography*, pp. 382-383

Contrarily, Daisy follows the previous generation's social construct of marrying a wealthy man and becoming a mother to continue on the family line, despite the fact that these are things she does not want to do. Daisy was once in love with Gatsby prior to meeting Tom and, now that she has such a man back in her life, their reunion understandably leads to a reignited love. In contrast to Tom's adultery, Daisy's involvement with Gatsby is presumed to be her only extramarital excursion and her only challenge to the schemas of society that would indicate accommodation. Daisy has retreated from this act of accommodation by the end of the novel, however, as a result of Tom's continued toxic masculine ownership, and the last time she is seen she is nodding in agreement with whatever her husband seems to be suggesting. Her mentality is still malleable, but the tryst with a past love ultimately only reinforces her assimilative behavior. The youth of these characters provides a movable mentality regarding the schemas of society, but the social paths they are traversing may lead to dangerous conclusions, much like Zelda's journey.

Though Nick is fast approaching thirty, he begins in a position of accommodation and is able to fight against every temptation to assimilate throughout the novel. He experiences thoughtless indulgence in alcohol, which some characters ingest to obliterate the pain of existence, and he is able to maintain his perspective and not cave in to the excessive society around him. As well, avoiding Gatsby's offer of a side job that immediately seems quite problematic and illegal preserves his value in "self-sufficiency," which was the shell of his reason for moving to New York. Self-sufficiency "draws a stunned tribute from [Nick]," but his true claim for moving is that "[e]verybody [he] knew was in the bond business" and he felt lonely in the middle-west, now the "ragged edge of the universe" (*Gatsby* 13, 7). The hopeful center that Nick hoped to find included a romantic entanglement with the assimilative Jordan,

but the failed relationship does not break Nick but instead reaffirms his accommodative qualities upon realization that she is young and does not yet understand moral value.

Nick's capacity for accommodation is indicated in the first two sentences of the novel. He, as the narrator, claims that "in my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since. 'Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone,' he told me, 'just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had'" (5). Perhaps an advantage here, beyond financial stability and gentlemanly upbringing, is accommodation. Nick is "inclined to reserve all judgments" and, throughout the novel, is able to be a spectator in a completely assimilative environment. Nick's spectatorship occurs during a cycle of rebirth that he experiences just prior to his thirtieth birthday, which gives him "the familiar conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer" (*Gatsby* 8). The events leading up to his birthday conclude with the confrontation between Tom and Gatsby regarding Daisy's fate.

Following the exposure of Gatsby's profession, his swift loss of Nick's "[renewal] of complete faith," the narrator considers how Gatsby, upon being outed for his lies and angles that were all constructed to obtain Daisy, looked as though he had "killed a man" (*Gatsby* 136, 142). I posit that this man he has killed is the false Gatsby that was born from James Gatz's longing. Nick realizes this, and as the tumult ends, he states that "'I just remembered that today's my birthday.' I was thirty. Before me stretched the portentous menacing road of a new decade" (142-43). This discovery situates his future in the context of the four types of people that Nick believes there to be from earlier in the text. He tells himself that "[t]here are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy and the tired," indicating the roles of Daisy, Gatsby, Jordan, and Tom respectively (85). Nick does not fit into this list, and this is because he exists outside of this

assimilative bubble. He knows that “a decade of loneliness” is what awaits him, but by the novel’s conclusion he is okay with this scenario (143).

Nick acknowledges the failures of those who wish to chase a single goal and maintain a singular mindset, particularly in his iconic final lines about the light of the future eluding the assimilated. He expresses that the failure is “no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning——” (189). This cut-off, in my reading, suggests that the cycle of the novel will occur again and that there will once more be failure where there can only be failure. Regardless of the conclusions that confront the assimilated, Nick feels that they will “beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (189). Try as one might, an assimilated person will not be successful in achieving agency or their true goal in life and will be reiterating the same quest. Nick’s realization of this and his subsequent commentary from two years in the future frame his journey as one of success and discovery in the wake of being surrounded by assimilated friends—or rather, acquaintances.

Tom is certainly one such acquaintance who represents post-thirty assimilation in the novel. Tom, thirty at the novel’s opening, exists as a foil to Nick and embodies what could become of those who seek wealth and ownership in such a toxic environment of excess and financial speculation. Thriving on control and representing the privilege of power in wealth that Fitzgerald critiques in other works, Tom is shown to be set in his ways as an authoritative traveler who never settles for one location, person, or conclusion.¹⁶ Tom can also be seen as an anticipation of characters like Trent and Rip in *Less Than Zero*, acting as the powerful forces of self-indulgence that take what they want and damage others with no mind paid to the

¹⁶ See Kathleen Parkinson, *Critical Studies: The Great Gatsby*, p. 11. Fitzgerald’s “A Diamond as Big as the Ritz” was an early example of the author’s critique of the American economy and its excess. The story was submitted to but rejected by the *Saturday Evening Post* “because it was critical of American materialism,” and only “optimistic stories were wanted for popular consumption.”

consequences of their actions. Among them there is a lack of moral understanding regarding the world around them and an aimlessness in their journeys, epitomized in *Less Than Zero* by Rip's driving down a dead-end road because he has nowhere else to go (195). Most likely due to this sort of aimlessness, Tom and Daisy were expatriates in France for a period before returning to the United States. Nick explains that he immediately feels as though "Tom would drift on forever seeking a little wistfully for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game," and in terms of trying to find a place to settle this is very true (10). There is a sense of drama that Tom enjoys creating—exclusively when it is in his control—including his affairs that he had leading to the Buchanan's moving away from Santa Barbara and Chicago. This excessive quality of wanting more than one partner shows his separation from the institution of marriage, but not as a liberating movement to bring equality to the partners but rather in order to subjugate the disadvantaged side of such a contract. He continues this behavior by involving himself with Myrtle Wilson by, as far as he knew at the time, raping her after she threatened to "call a policeman" for his forwardness (40).

Tom's maintained assimilative ownership of Daisy and Myrtle is threatened due to Gatsby's introduction into his life. Tom discovers that George has become aware of Myrtle's infidelity and is planning to move; he also learns about Gatsby's spree with Daisy and how she seemed to be considering divorce. Nick acknowledges that Tom's "wife and his mistress, until an hour ago secure and inviolate, were slipping precipitately from his control" (*Gatsby* 131). Tom is a man structured on control, and his assimilative ways are being challenged. After his stand against Gatsby, he expresses how he will treat Daisy better, yet by the end of the novel readers have confirmation from Nick that Tom remains the same man he has been since the novel's onset.

Nick's final confrontation with Tom finds the former acknowledging that he "couldn't forgive [Tom] or like him but [Nick] saw that what he had done was, to him, entirely justified" (*Gatsby* 187). Tom still looks at himself without fault, maintaining the lifestyle he wishes to pursue and remaining unaffected by his influence in Gatsby's murder. This aggravates Nick, leading him to believe that Tom and Daisy are both "careless people" who "smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money" (187-88). Financial support provides no reason for the Buchanans to change their mentalities or actions, and perhaps Nick sees that the couple is doomed to cycle through these rows and apexes of forgiveness through the remainder of their lives. Nick identifies Tom's assimilation by suggesting that their handshake upon parting made Nick feel "suddenly as though [he] were talking to a child" (188). This is the Piagetian stunting of development that money can cause, perceived by Nick and Gatsby earlier in the text, which makes a grown man appear to have the mentality of an adolescent due to the lack of necessity to age or gain responsibility. Gatsby may see this in Tom, but he is able to dodge introspection with the same lens.

Gatsby, also in his thirties, is the character to whom Nick is arguably the closest throughout the novel. A surface reading of the text positions him as a hero in a way—one who embodies the search for the American Dream and brings life to the post-war celebration that was the Jazz Age. A deeper dive into the text with the application of Piaget's theory of cognitive development allows readers to find that Gatsby is in fact the personification of assimilation. Beyond Tom, who is challenged at times and must fight to regain his mentality, Gatsby is never shaken from pursuing his goal: acquiring Daisy Buchanan.

Nick, an agent of accommodation, expresses that Gatsby stood for "everything for which I had an unaffected scorn" (6). This specific word choice indicates that Gatsby is composed of

something disagreeable that does not weigh on Nick's decision-making; my belief is that this disagreeable aspect is assimilation. Nick continues to express that Gatsby "turned out all right at the end," perhaps addressing the fact that Gatsby's death occurred while he still clung to an assimilative hope that he would obtain Daisy (6). There was no better direction for Gatsby's outcome in terms of his mentality, and thus this line is perhaps suggesting that the assimilative nature experienced by Gatsby is one that is total; death prior to losing his life's very meaning is his reward for being wholly assimilative. Gatsby later mentions, regarding his feelings about going to war and facing what we later discover to be the loss of Daisy as a potential partner, that he "tried very hard to die" in World War I. In a way he did die upon his return from war, given how Jay Gatsby was born from the crumbling hope of James Gatz.

In Nick's view, this methodical sense of self-invention has been growing since Gatsby's youth. As indicated by a note in one of his books during his early teen years, Gatsby established a daily regimen for bettering himself and looking the part of a wealthy man (181). He controlled his life in thirty-minute blocks, learning how to be both personable and timely while exerting a sense of control that only grew outward into society. Much like Tom, he developed an enjoyment of and knack for establishing control. Upon agreeing to bring Daisy and Gatsby together, Nick denies a job offer from Gatsby in a confidential side business. This leaves Gatsby at Nick's behest in the former's eyes, and since Nick will not take any offer Gatsby eventually goes "unwillingly home" (88). In this moment, Gatsby does not have control, and he is unable to exert moral influence over Nick—in stark contrast to his ability to influence others through his displays of success at his parties. Nick is his opponent in this moment, acting as an agent of accommodation to counter the stabs of assimilative temptation.

This oppositional relationship between Nick and Gatsby changes when Gatsby meets Daisy again and they begin their affair. When showing Daisy his home, Gatsby is notably “star[ing] around at his possessions in a dazed way as though in her actual and astounding presence none of it was any longer real” (97). Gatsby only ever wanted Daisy to be real in his life, and such an actualization turned his reality into a sort of unreality with the crumbling façades of his financial history, business, and motivations coming to his consciousness as he experiences the miraculous return of Daisy.¹⁷ Gatsby maintains concern that Daisy may slip from his grasp, particularly when she does not seem to enjoy one of the parties that he created in hopes of bringing her back to him. Nick informs him that one cannot repeat the past, to which Gatsby replies: “[w]hy of course you can!” (116). This is assimilation incarnate. Gatsby is confronted with the accommodative idea that one cannot travel back or fix earlier mistakes, but he believes that if one maintains the mindset that the past can be reintroduced and therefore fixed, it can bring about the fruition of one’s dreams.

Gatsby’s dream, however, comes crashing down when it is revealed that he is actually a bootlegger from the middle-west with an absolute obsession over someone he hardly knows or ever knew. Following the confrontation with Tom, Gatsby waits outside of the Buchanan home in hopes of making sure Daisy is okay and that she will come out to see him. Nick expresses that Gatsby remained at the home, “watching over nothing” (153). Nothing is indeed the reward that is won through Gatsby’s assimilation, and his rejection of the potential that the relationship would not continue is further reinforced by his belief that she never loved Tom. He concedes to Nick that “[o]f course she might have loved him, just for a minute, when they were first married—and loved me more even then, do you see?” (159). At this point in Gatsby’s journey,

¹⁷ See *The Great Gatsby*, p. 105. Gatsby experienced the “unreality of reality” in his youth, dreaming of potential futures that seemed like fables but were able to be worked toward. These were “instinct[s] toward his future glory.”

this statement does not reflect his refusal to see that Daisy does not feel the way he believes, but rather his *inability*. Gatsby, set in his post-thirty ways and dedicated to a singular vision of assimilative thinking, is truly unable to accommodate. The inability embodies Gatsby's being, and when George Wilson murders Gatsby and then himself, Nick concludes that with the suicide the "holocaust was complete" (170). Holocaust, meaning a "complete sacrifice or offering," accurately describes the action Wilson takes in killing such an influential person, but the act also shows the total destruction of Gatsby's being in less than twenty-four hours as he devolves from the wealthy lover of Daisy Buchanan to the empty, vulnerable Jay Gatz (OED).

Gatsby's obsession with Daisy is perhaps most importantly noted when he shows his bedroom to her and Nick. Daisy may represent excess, the strongest critical element of the economy in terms of the greed of men serving to damage and corrupt others, but this sequence truly shows assimilation's ability in society. When Gatsby begins lobbing clothing down on Daisy, showering her in riches and excess, she is unable to take the sheer volume and succumbs to shoving "her head into the shirts and... cry[ing] stormily" (98). The crying, supposedly due to Daisy's sadness for not having seen "such beautiful shirts before," is a mixture of joy for having Gatsby back in her life, as well as, in my Piagetian reading, a conceit to the power of assimilation. Excess is a brutal, strong element, one that in terms of industry can inspire a figurehead of a nation—such as was exhibited in the 1980s with Reagan and today with Trump—to enact certain policy that harms the populace in order to assist corporations. Assimilation, in this instance, inspires an entire generation to maintain a certain mentality beyond the reach of a single authoritative figure. In this novel's context, Daisy may be a figure that is pined after and offered exorbitantly priced rewards to settle down with suitors, but Gatsby

is able to change the landscape of New York and the mentalities of its people.¹⁸ This is not accommodation, however. Rather, *Gatsby* is an ephemeral beacon of excess that attracts those who would be involved in soirées elsewhere if his parties did not provide such accessibility to the exorbitant lifestyle. When *Gatsby* dies, so does this world, moving on as if it had never happened at all and obstructing any change that could be made from the moral lessons of *Gatsby*'s failures.

Jay *Gatsby* is a vastly important character in the American literary canon, and to examine him in this new context is to give a new reading to a formative novel that examines the wealth of the time period in order to provide a modern sociological and psychological view of the 1920s. Highlighting assimilation's effect on society shown through such acclaimed literature shows that the critical approach is not only possible but benefits scholars as they seek out a connection between economic, social, and individual critique that establishes an orderly interpretation of the material. *The Great Gatsby*, approaching its one hundredth year of publication, provides a critical dissection of early twentieth-century society, and when coupled with *Less Than Zero*, the critique of America and its literature becomes more potent and truly expands the reach of Piagetian development as a theoretical and critical approach. This use of Piaget in *The Great Gatsby* and *Less Than Zero* is promising for the continuation of the critical perspective across literary boundaries and generations.

¹⁸ Tom gifted Daisy a pearl necklace worth \$350,000 (*Gatsby* 80). Compared to this assessment in 1919, inflation would price the necklace at approximately \$5,345,577 (CPI Inflation Calculator).

3 “YOU LOOK PALE”: TANNING AND THE ASSIMILATIVE ENVIRONMENT IN *LESS THAN ZERO*

Desert Island Books curated top-ten collections of certain celebrities’ favorite novels, including those of Bret Easton Ellis. Released along with a 2016 *New York Times* article, the list included *The Great Gatsby* and gave a brief rationale for the placement of Fitzgerald’s masterpiece among what Ellis considered to be the most regarded works of fiction. He expresses that the novel, which he sometimes considers to be the greatest twentieth-century American novel, struck Ellis due to its beauty, its “tabloid immediacy, the high body count, its modernistic touches, [and] the relentless drama.... It’s not only an elegy for the jazz era but for the idea of the American dream” (“Top Ten Books”). While *The Great Gatsby* is an elegy of its current age told through the eyes of a passive protagonist, *Less Than Zero* can be described with the exact same language.

Bret Easton Ellis’s 1985 bildungsroman is a mouthpiece for the disaffected and politically disillusioned Generation X. Some critics regard it as a work dedicated to identifying the generation’s feelings on Ronald Reagan and his administration, media, and the generation’s lack of parental oversight.¹⁹ Ellis himself claims that the novel “was an indictment not only of a way of life I was familiar with but also—I thought rather grandly—of the Reagan eighties and, more indirectly, of Western civilization in the present moment” (*Lunar Park* 6). Criticism of *Less Than Zero* has largely pointed out this indictment of the political factors of the time period, often discussing the novel’s portrayal of upper-class economic privilege in the favorable

¹⁹ Bildungsroman, n. “A novel that has as its main theme the formative years or spiritual education of one person” (OED); For further on the characters of a bildungsroman, see Marianne Hirsch Gottfried and David H. Miles, “Defining Bildungsroman as a Genre.” In Gottfried’s words, Miles, a leading scholar of the genre upon the article’s publication, suggests that the protagonist of a bildungsroman is a psychological hero defined by “his ultimate assimilation into existing society” (122). Clay is indeed a bildungsroman protagonist given his assimilative fall into the activities and practices of the youthful Los Angeles environment.

economy of the early 1980s and its typically postmodern critique of the attention-destroying new media of *MTV*.

Ashley M. Donnelly's comprehensive work on Reagan's impact and place as depicted in *Less Than Zero* suggests that, in Ellis's novel, Americans of the time period were working through feelings of distrust and even apathy over the damage dealt by such political fiascos as Vietnam and the Watergate scandal. Donnelly sees Ellis's novel as a response to the national dominance, both politically and economically, of Reagan's feel-good government. Donnelly argues that Ellis's novel mocks the president's rhetoric and verbiage—which utilized brand names and empty semiotic signs—to show how his endorsement of consumerism impacted on youth culture (4).

Other criticism of *Less Than Zero* compares the pacing of the novel and the length of its chapters to the break-neck media storm of *MTV*'s programming. The phenomenon of *MTV* is examined by Jean Baudrillard, who suggests that the television and its bright, enticing images are the “ultimate and perfect object for this new era” through which “our own body and the whole surrounding universe become a control screen” (127). Though referring to television's general potential, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari very much describe the essence of *MTV* in 1977 with the claim that such a channel, an amalgam of “floating images constantly produced by capitalism,” would allow for the entire world to unfold “right at home, without one's having to leave the TV screen” (*Anti-Oedipus* 251). Continuing this thought, Ann E. Kaplan discusses the excess that is found in the hypnotic nature of *MTV*, where the spectator is “suspended in a state of unsatisfied desire but forever under the illusion of *imminent* satisfaction through some kind of purchase” (12). *MTV* can be seen here almost as a drug, consumed by the nation's youth and

isolating young people from the realities of economic inequality, rising disaffection, and the parental failure of the previous generation.

In a 1985 interview with William F. Buckley, Jr., Ellis compares *MTV* to a narcotic, mentioning the “hypnotic” experience of watching the channel and pointing out a shifting perspective on what older generations expect from television compared to what the nation’s youth is collectively experiencing (00:11:07-11:41).²⁰ Buckley himself, roughly sixty years old upon the taping of the interview, bemoans his discovery of *MTV* just three months prior to the interview, though the channel had existed and been consumed by the youth since 1981 (00:10:51-10:53). Buckley’s lack of knowledge and his inability to understand the draw of the channel shows the distance between members of Generation X and older generations. Ellis depicts this sort of ideological generational gap in *Less Than Zero*. Kirk Curnutt claims that, in the novel, Clay and his damaged generation must endure a postlapsarian adolescence that Ellis correctly suggests is “more lost than previous lost generations” (100).

I provide this overview of existing criticism of Ellis’s novel to show that, while scholarship on the text covers key talking points about the Reagan era’s politics, media, and youth, it has not yet recognized a key theme in the novel which deserves attention: the act and role of tanning as a symbol for Piaget’s concern with assimilation and accommodation. While mentioned throughout the novel in a way that is understated and at first humorous, tanning becomes a crucial vehicle for introducing, almost as a signpost, the first assimilative details of the Los Angeles youth environment. The nature of tanning is an identity element in the novel,

²⁰ See Ian Buchanan, p. 88. Buchanan discusses the effects of a body without organs; I claim here that *MTV* may be considered such an object. “Through their activities, the masochist, the anorexic or alcoholic, reduces his or her capacity for affection. Accordingly, their plateau of intensity, which is singular, and therefore incapable of making new connections or entering into new compositions, is *reactive*, deadly.” This reflects the addictions and addictive qualities of the characters in *Less Than Zero*, primarily in their inability to accommodate.

and all ages and sexes who belong to the in-group of society are involved in the practice. This chapter will therefore discuss the social importance of tanning and being tan in *Less Than Zero*, presenting tanning as the first level of assimilation in the novel's society. As a *Culture Trip* article suggests, "With the help of spray tans and the tanning bed, even if you're pale [in LA], you're tan" (Ashoori). This fascination with tanning is shared by the characters in *Less Than Zero*; as a result, tanning becomes a touchstone for analyzing the novel's critique of the economy and its impact on mental development in the young.²¹

I will employ Piaget's terms of assimilation and accommodation as a new angle of approach to *Less Than Zero*, showcasing the value of these terms for interpreting Ellis's novel and the potential that these terms in cognitive theory may have as a lens for literary discourse more generally. I will chronologically discuss moments in the novel that demonstrate the significance of tanning as a vehicle for assimilation. Following this, I shall conclude that Clay, after reflecting, developing a moral stance, and coming to a new sense of understanding following his rejection of tanning, is able to accommodate and find balance to move beyond his accustomed environment.

First, it is helpful to investigate the historical meaning behind the word "tan," both from a social and economic perspective. The earliest definition of the word is "to convert (skin or hide) into leather by steeping in an infusion of an astringent bark, as that of the oak, or by a similarly effective process" (OED). Such a definition shows that the act of tanning, whether applied to one's own skin or to an animal's hide in order to make it more of a leathery substance, has always been an economic act. In the case of animal hide, the item's use-value is increased upon being tanned in this context; whereas in the case of human skin, tanning is essentially a

²¹ For a brief chronology of the rise and advancements in tanning, see Diana Nguyen, "A History of Tanning—From Coco Chanel to Contouring."

performative measure to create or maintain the *image* of worth, belonging, and affluence. Sharon Koskoff looks at the history of tanning, examining how two events in 1920s France—obsession with Josephine Baker’s natural “caramel” skin tone and the “bronzed” skin of Coco Chanel upon her return from a yachting expedition—spawned the craze for tanned skin. Because the darker tone on fairer skin suddenly became a feature of beauty, “A *winter* tan became a symbol of the leisure class and showed you could afford to travel to exotic climates” (Koskoff 2, emphasis mine). In this way, the “capital” of one’s body became a reflection of broader economic and social values.

This commodification of the body is represented throughout Ellis’s novel and is highlighted by the frequent use of the quote “I wonder if he’s for sale,” originally spoken by Clay’s fifteen-year-old sister after an outrageous shopping spree (*Less Than Zero* 23).²² While this line conveys the equation of attractive and tanned individuals with those who possess buying power, it also suggests that the value of tanning is in maintaining solidarity with the in-group. A winter tan is indeed what Clay’s friends have achieved, all of whom are golden brown and expect their friend to join them as a member of high society through this physical process of assimilation. Such an expectation is a symptom of their own assimilation: they are unable to change how they perceive their environment and the expectations that come with upper class aesthetics and schemas.

Upon returning home to a sun-loving Los Angeles, Clay is informed by many people in his former circle that he looks pale and needs a tan. These types of comments are first stated almost as insults by his on-again, off-again girlfriend Blair after she drives him to his family

²² See *Lunar Park*, p. 11. Ellis addresses his popularity at the time of *Less Than Zero*’s publication by mentioning how unless one was photogenic, they would be unable to make it as a successful writer given the environment and emphasis on image. This concern with tanning extends beyond Ellis’s fiction, or at least across different texts.

home from LAX (Ellis 10). Her commentary on Clay's skin is the antithesis of a welcoming embrace: Blair informs him that he is not like her, not like society. He is different, and she wants it to be known so he will change himself and fit in with the rest of her crowd. The prospect of an accommodating rather than assimilating element in Blair's circle frightens her given the way she processes everyday surrounding schemas. She lives moment-to-moment and fills her life with activities and relationships—such as the later viewing of the snuff film and the general toxic relationship with an unloving Clay—that seem to negatively affect her and reflect her disaffection and inability to better herself or her scenario.

The difference Blair points out between Clay and the rest of the surrounding youth is affirmed shortly after, when Clay arrives at Blair's party and finds an old friend named Trent. Clay is once more called pale, which prompts him to focus on "most of the other people's complexions around the room" (*Less Than Zero* 14). Trent does not stop at this comment but invites him to visit an indoor tanning place, Uva Bath, that dyes the skin. Trent, as a male model, understandably visits such a place to maintain his image, but he makes a final comment on the establishment that is quite striking. He does not want anyone to know that he goes to Uva Bath, looking "worried, concerned almost" that Clay will mention that Trent goes there to get his skin dyed. Trent's emotional response is a product of the assimilative nature of having a tan. He wishes to be a part of his environment, assimilating to the mindset that to do so requires a natural rather than fabricated tan. The tan is crucial in society and in Trent's work, further emphasizing the connection that tanning has to sexuality given the need for the muscular-bodied model to maintain a sensual, stimulating complexion. The emphasis on Trent's fear reveals this simple scene's foundational power. This moment is the only time in the novel that Ellis suggests Trent is worried or frightened. Once more, schemas have played into a character's inability to think for

himself; accommodation would allow for Trent to achieve a tan in whatever way he wishes—or not get one at all—but his assimilative environment keeps him from developing this agency.

In this light it is helpful to look to Jerod Stapleton et al.'s publication on indoor tanning and body image. In their study, it is reported that “indoor tanning is motivated by a user's belief that being tan is a central aspect of being a beautiful or attractive person, called *internalization of a tan beauty ideal*” (Stapleton 2). This internalization is hinted at throughout the novel, explaining Trent's need to use Uva Bath while also believing that a natural tan is ideal. Tanning, in this instance, has an economic quality, and the novel uses tanning as an economic critique of how bodies attain symbolic exchange value in their environment.²³ Trent's wish to be tan both as an assimilative and commodified quality is reflected when he harasses Clay for his change in behavior, overreacting to the latter's dressing of his Fatburger. He is appalled, claiming that “You can't eat a Fatburger without chili. Jesus, you're weird” (20). While this is a seemingly minor comment, it may be a tell-tale sign that Trent sees Clay as an outsider and feels threatened by this fact. Trent, like Blair, is not uncomfortable with Clay but certainly knows he is *different*. The genesis of this difference is Clay's lack of a tan.

Contrary to suggesting that Clay should visit an Uva Bath, another friend, Alana, suggests that the cure for Clay's paleness should be to “go to the beach or something” (17). Early in the novel these suggestions become advertisements for assimilation, providing Clay with multiple different, easy ways to rejoin this crowd to which he once belonged. With these considerations in mind, Clay then encounters a friend, Pierce, who continues the trend of mentioning Clay's paleness (30). Clay, in this encounter, notices Julian at the party and sees that

²³ See *Less Than Zero*, p. 175. Internalization is shown in this sequence, where Clay must watch his childhood friend Julian have intercourse with a visiting businessman. The man tells Julian that “[he is] a very beautiful boy,” stating afterward that “here, that's all that matters.”

he is “still tan, hair still blond and short.” Ellis lets the reader know that Julian is still accepted in society given his tan, while Clay is on the outside. Blair, to partially amend this, gives Clay a scarf and demands that he put it on (31). In doing so, Clay is agreeing to cover up some of his unassimilated skin, keeping those in his environment from noticing his lack of conformity.

At this party, Clay and new friend Griffin hit it off and leave for the latter’s empty mansion to engage in intercourse. When Griffin rids himself of his clothing, Clay is exposed to a body that is fully tan. As Clay says, “I notice that [Griffin] doesn’t have a tan line and I begin to wonder why and almost laugh” (37). The implication is that Griffin has been lying nude in front of the sun or in a tanning bed, indicating his commitment to looking tan even in places that few—presumably—will see. However, this introduces a new aspect to the assimilative quality of tanning in that Griffin’s entire body is changed, indicating that he is fully indoctrinated in society in a way that even Clay’s other friends are not. Soon after, Clay wakes and takes multiple long looks at himself in Griffin’s bathroom mirror. This may be a moment of self-reflection after seeing what a fully assimilated body looks like. Clay is on the cusp of this assimilation now that he has returned home to an overwhelming sentiment encouraging him to tan and attempt to become more like those in his environment. His act of considering, while looking in the mirror, whether or not to bend to the pressures of the group resonates with the etymological significance of his name. Clay literally means “a tenuous paste capable of being moulded into any shape, which hardens when dried” (OED). Assimilation may be Clay’s final molding before he achieves a set shape of cognitive and moral qualities.

My suggestion that Clay is being molded by his surroundings is further supported when the protagonist discovers a billboard upon leaving Griffin’s home. The billboard reads “Disappear Here,” which, Clay remarks, “freaks me out a little and I step on the gas really hard”

(38). The feeling of falling into his environment, lacking agency and a sense of self, has inspired feelings of fear in Clay, evoking thoughts that lead to his rejection of taking valium when he gets home. This is a fight against assimilation and the drug culture of the in-group. A reflection of society through the use of a billboard is also exhibited in *The Great Gatsby*, which signifies media's effect on the agency and decision-making of the novel's characters. American lives were moving faster than ever before in the Jazz Age, and one magnanimous transition was found in marketing: the advent of the automobile caused American vehicles to match the speed of the progressive decade. Such speeds made advertisers with on-road billboards rethink their marketing strategies and change their designs since, as John Steele Gordon suggests, "a sign had to be grasped instantly or it wouldn't be grasped at all" (299). With the "wordy style of nineteenth-century advertising disappear[ing]," *The Great Gatsby* situates readers into an environment of modernity with the wordless, haunting billboard of T.J. Eckleburg (300).

Nick introduces readers to Eckleburg's eyes by placing them in the valley of ashes, an abject pit of humanity between stations of wealth. Here, the billboard promoting a "wild wag of an oculist" seems to represent more of a faceless glance at God given the piercing, yard-high retinas and positioning that makes the eyes "brood on over the solemn dumping ground" around them (*Gatsby* 27-8). This billboard is later directly equated to God by a distraught George Wilson, who claims that, regarding Myrtle's affair, God sees through all. He projects to the room that Myrtle may fool her husband "but [she] can't fool God," causing neighbor and listener Michaelis to remind and perhaps reassure the grieving widower that "[t]hat's an advertisement" (167). This quality of religiosity directed toward the billboard indicates the internal sway that advertisements have on people. While Clay's experience is not explicitly religious in any way, the billboard in *Less Than Zero* seems to represent a divine sense of understanding, warning Clay

of what his future holds were he to maintain his current way of life. He considers changing his direction in life, but seems to bounce back to his old ways in the morning when hearing a song titled “Artificial Insemination” and waiting until it concludes before getting out of bed.²⁴ Clay rises and decides he does need a tan before doing a few lines of cocaine. This is media’s effect on the youth, invoking feelings of wishing to belong to the in-group and igniting a moral lapse by allowing the youth to partake in damaging activities that harm their quality of life.

Clay eventually caves to the pressures of the in-group and goes with most of his close friends to a beach club to get a tan. Clay sits alone prior to the engagement, staring out at the “expanse of sand that meets the water, where the land ends,” and thinks “Disappear here” (73). He knows he is about to indulge in an assimilative activity, and perhaps he is saying goodbye to whatever identity he believes he possesses up to this point. After a brief tanning sequence, Clay informs Griffin that he feels tense. Griffin informs Clay that “Things’ll be okay,” calming the latter and causing Clay to feel that “there, back on the beach, in the sun, staring out into the Pacific, it seems really possible to believe Griffin” (74).

This is a crucial moment of insight regarding the attractive qualities of tanning on a social level, particularly in that Clay can experience the thoughtless, calming quality of Piagetian assimilation that epitomizes the novel’s depiction of Generation X’s moment-to-moment living. Clay experiences a cognitive halt, one which consists of a lack of concern regarding the future beyond believing that everything will be fine. Perhaps here Clay gets the purest feeling of assimilation possible, disregarding the wish to claim agency and morality for himself and embracing instead a sense of calm that is difficult to achieve in such a complex age and in a time

²⁴ Waiting until this “Artificial Insemination” is complete is a striking moment, almost propagating the idea that Clay is being assimilated against his will and in a way unnatural. Perhaps this may have led to the thought of tanning, hearing of an artificial process—much like indoor tanning—that replaces the real thing but is not as fun, socially acceptable, or normalized.

of economic instability and moral decay. Such a moment also reflects Fredric Jameson's definition of the schizophrenic, an individual who has no temporal continuity and is "condemned to live a perpetual present with which the various moments of his or her past have little connection and for which there is no conceivable future on the horizon" ("Postmodernism" 119). Jameson's description of the postmodern schizophrenic reflects Clay's experience in this moment, but also sheds light on Ellis's textual positioning of the novel's twelve flashbacks, which seem to be linked with Clay's narrative solely as negative memories set around the same period. Hence, the novel gives the illusion that there is a perpetual present experienced even when one remembers the past. Moreover, those around Clay also reveal this schizophrenic quality. Rip, Trent, and others are living without considering consequences and merely acting without thought. Any past—such as relationships, memories, former sexual relations—are divorced from their present state, and there are no thoughts of the future; this last point can be condensed into a single quote from Rip. After being asked about his working status as a DJ, he states that "The trust is keeping things steady for now. I might go back when I run out. Only problem is, I don't think it's ever gonna run out" (33). This is the perpetual present that tanning represents: it is an assimilative quality, a thought process that is never altered regardless of schema, that all of these characters possess. Once more, this mindset seems foreign to Clay until he experiences his moment of calm on the beach while remembering Griffin's promises of harmony.

Most important about this experience, however, is that Clay is immediately removed from his assimilative experience by the acknowledgment, soon afterward, that he became sunburned. This recognition shows that too much exposure and willingness to indulge in the assimilative grandeur of not caring about the future is problematic and establishes a narrative

turn for Clay. Soon he begins noticing that others are not as put together as they seem; such a perspective is perhaps the reason that Julian, the next time Clay sees him, is described as “pale beneath his tan”. Shortly after, Clay is introduced to Lene, a woman who he acknowledges to be “too tan” (98). Aside from a general comment on her skin tone, this could also be a reference to Lene’s involvement with the show *MV3* and her seeming embodiment of all things that are well-regarded socially. As Clay becomes more accepted, as is suggested by Rip’s comment on his “Great tan,” he becomes more involved in drugs and the darker, more secret parts of his environment (105). Yet the more he seems to assimilate to his environment on a surface level, the more he sees how individualism is impossible in this environment where everyone looks the same: “thin, tan bodies, short blond hair, blank look in the blue eyes, same empty toneless voices” (152). Clay then acknowledges that he “look[s] exactly like them,” which is a terrifying thought and a turning point for Clay. Such a turning point is reinforced by Clay’s final physical interaction with Daniel, who appears to him as “tan to the point of sunburn, *younger* than [Clay] remember[ed] him in New Hampshire” (159, emphasis mine). Here Daniel’s regression suggests to Clay that the Los Angeles environment is a cancer on one’s personal development, and a force of destruction on individual identity in almost every way.

Perhaps the most powerful moment in which Clay experiences the destructive relationship between tanning and individual identity occurs through his sexual interaction with a sixteen-year-old he meets at a club. The scene, in a way, speaks for itself:

...I put my hands on her shoulders, and she says stop it and, after I let go, she tells me to lean against the headboard and I do and then she takes off the towel and she’s naked and she reaches into the drawer by her bed and brings out a tube of Bain De Soleil and she hands it to me and then she reaches into the drawer and brings out a pair of Wayfarer

sunglasses and she tells me to put them on and I do. And she takes the tube of suntan lotion from me and squeezes some onto her fingers and then she touches herself and motions for me to do the same, and I do. After a while I stop and reach over to her and she stops me and says no, and then places my hand back on myself and her hand begins again... and I take the sunglasses off and she tells me to put them back on and I put them back on and it stings when I come and then I guess she comes too.

(Less Than Zero 121)

Here the need for assimilation extends to a sexual dimension so that designer suntan lotion becomes a requirement for potentially achieving orgasm.²⁵ Such a moment emphasizes Baudrillard's words on reification, through which "power and sexuality [are] operating at the level of objects and the environment" (126). Sociologically, Baudrillard sees reification as "the production of signs, differentiation, status and prestige," and in the novel, all of these factors urge Clay to assimilate. Clay has difficulty with this isolated, masturbatory sexual scenario, however, implying that assimilation is not the process by which he wants to live his life. His resistance is symbolized in the text by the heavy rain, uncommon in Los Angeles and mentioned for the first time, when he leaves the girl's home. No light or tan can protect him from the downpour, and no tan can be achieved since the sun is blocked out. This may be a moment that inspires thoughts of accommodation, given the bizarre interconnection of sex, drugs, and violence—all involving friends and strangers who all look and act the same—in which Clay is wrapped up through the remainder of the novel.

Tanning is a topic that also extends to *The Great Gatsby*, establishing a symbolic connection between the 1980s and the similarly booming economic period of the 1920s. The

²⁵ This lotion, which possesses an incredibly low level of sun protection, is not meant to defend the body from the sun but is rather designed to assist the skin in being damaged and changed to a socially acceptable tone.

early period of the decade, in which F. Scott Fitzgerald lived in the French Riviera with his wife Zelda, saw the advent of the upper class's penchant for tanning following Josephine Baker and Coco Chanel's popularizing of the act as a leisure activity.²⁶ Susan L. Keller informs readers that during this time, tanning revealed "contradictions within consumer self-fashioning, as social prominence was now available to anyone with enough wealth" (130-31). This shifting of worth and identity in society "turned the body into an infinitely malleable fashion accessory," and the Fitzgeralds certainly accessorized. This body commodification, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, gives an attribute of the physical self a financial value, and such an aspect of lived experience no doubt influenced the content—activities performed, wishes possessed, and social hierarchies adhered to—that involved the upper class and specifically Jay Gatsby.

Almost all references to tanning in the novel are directed at the enigmatic Jay Gatsby. The man, immediately established at his first party as having "tanned skin," indicates his physical implications of both class and trendiness (*Gatsby* 54). Readers later discover that Gatsby's tan goes beyond trendiness, given Fitzgerald's description of Gatsby as having a natural tan and a "brown, hardening body" (104). This tanned skin, which is described at another time as "drawn unusually tight on his face," may indeed be an element of the false, almost mask-like identity that Gatsby is portraying throughout the novel, given that his origins are unknown to most around him (116). Gatsby maintains his tan and is fated to personify assimilation, but Clay is able to shake the in-group's pressures and find accommodation due to exposure to a far more devious reality than bootlegging and pursuing past love.

Clay's path to accommodation, rather than assimilation, is further reinforced by a pivotal meeting with his psychiatrist. He tells the doctor that he knows something is wrong but doesn't

²⁶ See Sharon Koskoff, *Art Deco of the Palm Beaches*, p. 2.

know what. He suggests that “maybe it has something to do with my parents but not really or maybe my friends or that I drive sometimes and get lost; maybe it’s the drugs” (122). Crucially important suggestions are supplied here, primarily in that the feelings associated with an absence of parental guidance, lack of individual and supportive friendships, lack of direction in life, and intense recreational drug use mask the pain of assimilation and are becoming palpable indications that he needs to accommodate rather than assimilate in Piaget’s terms. The essence of Piagetian accommodation is rerouting responses and life’s direction according to environmental stimuli, and Clay’s acknowledgment of this throughout the novel is powerful in terms of his subconscious knowledge that he will need to have such a revelatory and maintained accommodation to survive the winter break. This fear to accommodate is an ideological commitment to the in-group and belonging, which Jameson describes as “not first and foremost a matter of moral choice but of the taking of sides in a struggle between embattled groups” (*Political Unconscious* 291). Near the conclusion of the novel, it can be seen that the accommodative and the assimilative are indeed these embattled groups that attempt to remain untangled from moral and cognitive decay and those who wish to consume all into a singular mind of excess, respectively.

This accommodative turn in Clay’s development can be traced back to the brilliantly placed first line of the novel, in which Clay acknowledges that “People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles” (9). Such a line points out the problem of all members of Clay’s environment: people are afraid to change, afraid to go out of their comfort zones, and afraid to diverge from what others are doing. Using the automobile as a vessel representative of youth culture, there is a fear symbolically established in this scene that equates to a literal physical necessity to move in order to find comfort and accommodation. Fitzgerald also discusses change

in the context of the automobile, primarily by criticizing it as an object of systemic inequality between classes. In New York City, which Fitzgerald regarded as the essential setting for the “representation of modern American traumas,” the automobile was perhaps the hottest commodity of the Jazz Age boom (Parkinson 15).

Ford Motor Company sold approximately 2.2 million automobiles in 1923—a new annual record—while General Motors sold roughly 796,000 vehicles to the American public (“Industrial and Miscellaneous” 208).²⁷ The introduction of Ford’s Model T began a trend among car manufacturers to appeal to the middle-class along with their typical target of the wealthiest Americans. In such a way, Henry Ford’s decision to make the automobile affordable to the working class was “a purely American idea, an idea that transformed the American and world economies” (*Empire of Wealth* 297). The automobile was introduced to the market as an initial fixture of wealth and an image of class, but the utility of the invention soon spread to be accessible by the American public and, therefore, aimed to be used and supplied for the betterment of the common folk.

The use of the automobile in *The Great Gatsby* provides an inverse take on this idea, making the car out to be a troublesome object for common citizens. Jordan Baker shows the potential danger that these common people face when she comes close to smashing into a group of workmen; her proximity to the workers is such that “[her] fender flicked a button on one man’s coat” (*Gatsby* 63).²⁸ Nick reacts by criticizing her driving and her inability to be careful, to which Jordan remarks that other people are careful and that “[t]hey’ll keep out of [her] way.... It takes two to make an accident.” This insistence that responsibility for safety falls on the victim

²⁷ *The Great Gatsby* was written in 1923; because of this, I use the year as the basis for all comparisons to modern day and all numerical economic references to the decade.

²⁸ See Kathleen Parkinson, *Critical Studies: The Great Gatsby*, p. 41. Jordan Baker has a deeper connection to automobiles given that her name is “an amalgam of two American makes of car.”

rather than the perpetrator is harmful to the lower and working classes, who are the victims of the excess of the upper class which affects law and causes inequality in trade. This perception of the automobile reflects the dangers of “merging” in *Less Than Zero*: both instances symbolically foreshadow the trajectory of the novels. Every instance of trouble in *The Great Gatsby* stems from moments of selfishness via privileged perspectives that others will keep out of the way of the will and actions of the wealthy. It indeed takes two to make an accident, as shown by the damage of extramarital affairs, murders, and crime rings—all involving two people per incident.²⁹ Such inequality can be further found in *The Great Gatsby* in Tom Buchanan’s imposition of power on George Wilson by holding hostage an automobile that will provide for the latter’s betterment.³⁰ Ownership of a car also does not guarantee a better life, as readers find in Wilson’s scenario. His car, the only thing Wilson can claim to be his own within his shop, the “dust-covered wreck of a Ford,” represents the dilapidated goods that someone in the lower class may be able to receive (*Gatsby* 29). Such goods are low quality and are merely available to falsely inspire the poor that they may own what the wealthy own. Such problematized morality and social behavior that cars reflect in *The Great Gatsby* are shown in *Less Than Zero* via the upper class driving expensive cars to perform acts of violence, drug purchases, and aimless travel in the closed loop of 1980s Los Angeles.

Less Than Zero’s portrayal of very young characters—most importantly Clay’s sisters and Clay himself in his flashbacks—further reflect these themes of violence, drug usage, and nihilism. Ellis presents these characters by showing their obsession with the listed themes, dating back to when the characters were roughly twelve years old. Ellis’s novel presents a twelve-year-

²⁹ In *The Great Gatsby*, Affairs are had by Tom and Myrtle along with Gatsby and Daisy, Gatsby is murdered by George Wilson while Myrtle Wilson is murdered by Daisy, and the crime syndicate that readers are exposed to is operated primarily by Meyer Wolfshiem and Gatsby.

³⁰ See *The Great Gatsby*, pp. 29, 122, and 130.

old who manifests these obsessive environmental factors, in an extreme manner, in the girl Rip has kidnapped and tied to his bed. In his most important moment of awareness and agency in the novel, Clay sees this girl, being injected presumably with heroin to keep her incapacitated, and is truly disturbed. He is the only one who has this reaction, as Trent merely says “Wow” and Rip mentions how she “goes to Corvalis” (188). This reference is likely a purposeful misspelling of Corvallis, which represents the California middle school, given her age, located in the impoverished neighborhood of Norwalk. This instance hints at the economic advantage that Rip has over the young girl.

Clay has a moment of moral awakening in this moment, choosing to leave and demanding that Rip explain why he has done this. “Why not?” is Rip’s response. Afterward he tells Clay not to “look at [him] like [he is] some sort of scumbag or something” (189). Clay mentions, after collecting his thoughts, that he doesn’t think it is right, to which Rip asks, “What’s right? If you want something, you have the right to take it. If you want to do something, you have the right to do it.” This is a key moment in which the reader sees Rip’s lack of moral development and his assimilative response to his environment, revealing that he does what he wants and refuses to consider any moral aspect of his desire to consume at any cost. These statements about having the right to do and take what one wants are products of a morally derelict point of view, one which derives, in part, from the consumerism of his environment. Regarding Julian’s sale of drugs, Rip claims that his product is good “but he shouldn’t sell it to junior high kids. That’s real low” (126). Given that Rip regards kidnapping and raping a junior high kid as acceptable behavior yet demonstrates anger at the prospect of an illegal economic exchange with the same junior high kid indicates a strange perversion of economic values at the expense of moral responsibility. Rip’s reaction shows an assimilative nature of stunted moral

cognition that is also found in Trent—who engages in the rape—and others in Clay’s circle of friends.

Clay finds himself realizing this and has a decision to make. His choice, to leave Los Angeles and its inhabitants behind, is a victory according to critic Nicki Sahlin. Sahlin suggests that Clay makes a rational decision to leave, at the end of the novel, due to his knowledge that he would not be able to help or sway any of his friends. The process to change and accommodate is a personal, internal one, and Clay has the wherewithal to understand this. Sahlin states that by affirming “survival rather than oblivion, Ellis offers redemption in a nearly hopeless situation” given Clay’s discovery of “the courage to continue to live” (41). This is because Clay “cannot pretend to be unaffected by the devastating events he sees,” contrary to the “horrors to which his unquestioning companions remain blind” (Sahlin 37, 27). Clay concludes that there are images “of people being driven mad by living in the city.... of parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled that they ate their own children” trapped in his mind upon his departure (207). Ellen A. Seay suggests that this development of control over his environment, a sense of clarity after all he has experienced, reflects how the “violence that results within his mind kills part of him” (Seay 70). While these articles promote Clay’s turning point and betterment, I argue that his mentality and cognitive awareness through the novel are evidence of accommodation in Piaget’s sense. Clay not only has agency but has developed the knowledge that he must change his thinking in order to rationally deal with the world. He must logically and morally move beyond the pit of excess that the youth of Reagan’s America is experiencing.

Tanning provides the symbolic link between assimilation on a local level and Ellis’s critique of global economic excess in the time period depicted in the novel. Beyond a mere physical signifier of group belonging, a tan affirms the position of a member of the excessive

economy, stuck in a deluge of flawed moral judgment and problematic, often backwards logic. The characters have personal preference but no actual agency, which James Annesley reads as a by-product of commodification, arguing that late capitalism “is characterized by the absence of uncommodified spaces” (374-75). Clay himself, commodified throughout the novel, leaves behind his psychiatrist, girlfriend, and even Daniel—a foil for Clay to represent what he would have become were he to have stayed and given in to assimilation—to transcend the in-group’s personal preference to find life experiences on the fringes of sensation in order to blend in with a disaffected and economically exuberant society. Clay no longer needs this sort of stimulus, electing to instead return to New Hampshire in pursuit of a prosperous life with his new, tan-free mindset. He has finally discovered that due to the assimilative and damaging nature of his home, “[y]ou can disappear here without knowing it” (176).

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Ellis critiques the damage that he witnessed in his home environment that was caused by assimilative culture, firmly standing against the development of narcissism via media’s impact on the modern world:

[W]e don’t live in this kind of tactile, sensuous culture anymore where we feel things. Everything is digitized... including our love lives, including how we hook up with people, how we listen to music, read books, get our information.... We end up creating a society full of narcissists who then adapt to the culture of narcissism, and it’s no longer a culture of narcissism anymore. It’s something else; it becomes the norm. It becomes what’s normal. And I think that is what’s happening. And I see that in my friends who are much younger than me that that is in fact taking place. That they don’t have this conversation. This is not something that they... can relate to. It’s not even a conversation that they understand.

(“I really wasn’t” 00:00:36-00:01:19)

Narcissism, a construction of self-pleasing beyond consideration for others, is a pivotal moral and cognitive fault that exists in the assimilative. Accommodation allows for Clay to exhibit honesty to Blair, ending a tumultuous relationship before things could get worse, genuinely feeling sickened by the actions of those around him due to their self-obsession at the cost of physically and mentally harming strangers or, much worse, supposed friends. such a statement echoes the critical approaches of Jean Baudrillard on narcissism and communication.

Baudrillard—who is often linked as a key theoretical companion to Ellis’s novels—claims that “opposition is effaced in a sort of *obscenity* where the most intimate processes of our life become the virtual feeding ground of the media” (“The Ecstasy” 130).³¹ Nostalgia plays into the narcissism in that wanting feelings that were experienced in the past always seems to harm someone else and does not appease or allow comfort for the individual, leading to further self-obsessive behavior and an inability to resist the moral pitfalls of excess. Nostalgia is a driving force of disaffection that is fueled by assimilation, shown in an early moment of return by Daniel. He claims, with a strained effort, almost fighting the urge to re-enter Los Angeles society, that he “want[s] to go back”; when asked where he wants to go, Daniel says “I don’t know. Just back” (17-8).

The saddened yearning to return to a place is commented on by Andrew Newman, who suggests that “[d]uring the 1980s, [the American Dream] was indeed being ‘born back

³¹ For further discussion of the connections between Baudrillard’s theoretical approaches, see Martin Weinreich, “‘Into the Void’: The Hyperrealism of Simulation in Bret Easton Ellis’s ‘American Psycho.’” Weinreich claims that, citing Baudrillard’s *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Ellis’s writing reflects the belief that labor has been reduced to an idea since labor is everywhere and society is never free from experiencing labor (65). See also Robert Engley, “The Nothing that Emerges: Žižek and Baudrillard as Readers of Bret Easton Ellis.” Engley connects *Less Than Zero* to Baudrillard’s hyperreality by culture being “the result of a belief in and acceptance of the simulacrum,” which is the definitive distancing factor in society for Clay’s society (110).

ceaselessly into the past” (214). Yearning for the past by the youth of the nation is strikingly reflected in Clay’s memories of youth soccer with Julian in multiple interactions with the jovial-collegiate turned addict-prostitute (93, 175). It is a memory that he turns to in order to maintain a sense of calm but also suggests that he is at risk of drifting into a depressive nostalgia. This risk becomes clearest when Clay goes by his elementary school, recalling when he saw a former classmate “standing by the fence, alone, fingers gripping the steel wire and staring off into the distance as [Clay] told [himself] that the guy must live close by or something and that was why he was standing alone, like me” (164). There is a moment of clarity that comes to Clay here as he attempts to capture his past through unhealthy nostalgia, one which allows him to understand that he and this former classmate are experiencing the same wish to return to the days of simplicity when happiness was achievable. Youth seems so long ago for Clay, and he realizes this as he notices that one of the school bungalows and the old cafeteria “[were] in the process of being torn down” (165). In this moment Clay is able to see his past being destroyed before him and thus there is confirmation that there is no return to the feelings he had. Though sad, it is a moment of release for Clay, as he is now able to face himself and not reflect on a damaging chase for past comfort fueled by nostalgia. This destruction of the past helps Clay find accommodation and develop a moral and cognitive foundation.

A similar scenario is what inspires the events of *The Great Gatsby*, given the amorous relationship that bound Gatsby’s heart to Daisy. Nostalgia acts as the catalyst for Gatsby’s parties, relationships with Jordan and Nick, and professional life, inspiring a belief that he can relive the past and obtain Daisy once more. Gatsby’s assimilative nature causes him to believe in his rightful reunion with Daisy until his death, while the accommodative feelings that Clay attains by “walk[ing] away from the school without looking back” allow a sense of growth given

the necessity for such a change to survive (165). Gatsby paid for the carnal wishes that doomed his potential to assimilate, as did most characters in the novels beyond Nick and Clay. However, Nick and Clay triumph in a way that no one else does by achieving accommodation.

Several scholars have criticized as insignificant Clay's ability to resist excess at the end of the novel. A review by a Pan Macmillan affiliate claims that "Clay is a fucked up rich kid. He's not exactly a real figure, rather a shadow of what a real figure could be if he could wipe all this shit off" ("writing the books"). I take issue with this claim, and instead suggest that, in the end, Clay gains agency through accommodation and is able to develop a personality that sets him apart from others in his former environment. Piagetian theory helps here by establishing with clarity Clay's mentality at the end of the novel, revealing him to be an agent of moral and cognitive development who decides to do what is right now that the guise of assimilation is absent from his view. This critical position is perhaps best employed in challenging Michiko Kakutani's *New York Times* review. Kakutani argues that Clay's resistance is "hardly sufficient to establish him as a sympathetic hero, and in the end, his alienation remains undifferentiated from that of his fellow nihilists" (32). The application of the Piagetian model challenges this statement and points out that Clay's alienation is different from that of his peers, predominantly in that he was able to move past it and become a sympathetic symbol for those stuck in the generation that wished to fight against the Reagan era excess but were met with the boot heel of the in-group's dominant, assimilative views. A reader might feel initial remorse for Clay in that, early in the novel, he consistently follows others instead of thinking for himself. But by the end, especially in light of Reagan's legacy regarding the failed war on drugs, continued economic issues, and a skewed reshaping of American identity, Clay has emerged as someone who is fighting against a systemic issue of excess and self-obsession that could make modern readers

more likely to connect and understand.³² The novel informs readers that economic excess is a fixture of reality; if one wishes to survive, they must not only possess capital but must assimilate to the ideology and activities of the in-group.

³² For a perspective of the negative impact on economics and political identity, see Peter Dreier, "Reagan's Real Legacy." For Reagan's immediate yet in no way lasting success, see Lou Cannon, "Ronald Reagan: Impact and Legacy."

4 CONCLUSION

Examining literature from the psychological perspective has been historically beneficial to literary criticism and theory. Initially represented by Otto Rank's 1909 text, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, which portrays literature as a repressed "wish" in the manner of Freud's early theorizing about the dream-work, psychoanalytic and psychological criticism later evolved to include the contributions of a wide variety of theorists including Carl Jung, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva. My argument in this thesis has aimed to show that the application of Jean Piaget's concepts of accommodation and assimilation can add to the development of psychological approaches to literature. Where psychoanalytic approaches like those of Freud and Lacan explore Oedipal dynamics long identified in literary texts, the Piagetian approach I have utilized in this thesis investigates characters' adherence to or rejection of schemas and mass society's negative influences in a way that does not depend on the quasi-mythic origin stories and developmental models privileged by psychoanalysis. The specific nature of the Piagetian approach may at first seem limited, but as I have shown in this thesis, there are many ways in which this theory can be employed to address scenes, characters, and narrative arcs that might initially appear inaccessible to it.

This Piaget model introduces a new way of reading *The Great Gatsby* by presenting self-obsession and a lack of moral development in numerous characters as a symptom of behavior sparked by social excess. The assimilative view of Gatsby and all major supporting characters represents a flawed perspective shaped by a world dedicated to superficiality and excess, while Nick is able to see beyond this perspective despite living in the same environment as an agent. Marius Bewley refers to Nick's sense of "reality [which] is a thing of the spirit... a faith in the half-glimpsed, but hardly understood, possibilities of life" (225). While this position is

understandable, the application of Piaget goes further than this and instead asserts that Nick is able to glimpse these possibilities and understand the troubled world around him.

Less Than Zero is supported by this Piagetian model in that the novel is not shown to be a negative, destitute text about the Reagan era, but rather a story of a young, disaffected member of society fighting his environment and finding some semblance of agency. The transition Clay makes into an accommodating agent who actively makes his own decisions and no longer follows social trends or pack mentality is a palpable development in the scholarship on the character given his lack of academic support and strong evidence that weighs against his success in the novel. This psychological and cognitive critical lens of Ellis's text perhaps will allow a continuing discussion of the schemas and context of the novel from a perspective of rejecting or following the behavior of the Los Angeles environment.

The scope of Piagetian textual interpretation extends prior to *The Great Gatsby* and beyond *Less Than Zero*, encapsulating the transformative idea of American achievements and the consequences that come with sacrificing the well-being of citizens for the financial excess of these novels' antagonizing forces. The novels focused on in this thesis have been incredibly influential for the development of American narratives regarding youth and excess. *The Great Gatsby* inspired such texts as *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Fight Club* while *Less Than Zero* made an impact on Nick McDonell in his development of *Twelve*.³³ In providing inspiration from levels of plot and character, the connected Piagetian aspects of assimilation being rampant in twentieth- and twenty-first-century American society certainly prevail and reflect a consistent topic that has permeated the last one hundred years of literature involving disaffected American youths.

³³ For works inspired by *The Great Gatsby*, see Elizabeth Rowe, "Our Favorite 'Gatsby' References in Popular Culture." For Nick McDonell's inspiration and expose, see Tim Adams, "What I did in my holidays."

Beyond examining the novels chosen in this thesis, the scope of accommodation and assimilation may extend to a new intertextual perspective. Intertextuality works with specific approaches to semiotic arguments that Graham Allen suggests emphasize how “a text is constructed out of already existent discourse,” and I believe that a Piagetian intertextuality, or textual discourse between works involving assimilation and accommodation from tonal and symbolic perspectives, can be derived from Kristeva’s initial conception of the comparative approach (35). Though Allen posits that postmodernity and late capitalism have led intertextual practice to be “no longer capable of radical double-voicedness, collaps[ing] into a kind of pointless resurrection of past styles and past voices,” I would argue that merely focusing on the implications of economic and ideological shift would be a reductive approach to this textual connection (184). Rather, an approach that focuses on the implications of characters in similar times of excess, such as the relationship between *The Great Gatsby* and *Less Than Zero*, may introduce new economic perspectives, archetypal developments, and critical engagements with reader response than have been performed before.

Through the use of the Piagetian approach and the utilization of cognitive structures such as morality and critical thinking, I have examined the excessive environment of these American novels to find the times they were written in to be linked by numerous related themes and have found the novels themselves to represent similar ideas of a rapidly developing yet morally bankrupt society. I will finally pose the consideration of the future American novel, questioning whether the trends of excess, self-obsession, and disaffection will permeate texts and provide further material to be examined by the Piagetian model. There is a hope that there will be change, and this theory will be one of retrospect that can be applied to novels that have come before, but the likelihood of characters such as Nick, Clay, and all of the assimilative bodies in

the texts maintaining presence in American novels seems certain given our current economic, educational, political, and moral state as a nation. The theory offers analysis where there has yet to be academic consideration, questions the roles and outcomes of characters contrary to those affirmed by popular review, and allows for a new critical voice to emerge that gives a novel and potentially beneficial perspective to past, present, and future literature.

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