

ALISON POOLE'S OBLITERATED COMING OF AGE IN JAY MCINERNEY'S *STORY OF MY LIFE*¹

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Abstract: *Story of My Life* deals with the tribulations of Alison Poole, its main character and narrator, as she goes through a series of intense experiences within Manhattan's fun-seeking youth scene during the 1980's. McInerney presents the mishaps of this young hedonistic female as a sign of modern consumerism's failure, due to its superficiality and materialism. There is an underlying childish perception of what society should be like in her actions, owing to a naïve or infantile view of reality that handicaps her progress towards a truly positive social self-realization. The novel, in this manner, portrays the inner conflict experienced by immature individuals who are misled by seemingly fashionable lifestyles, and are caught within the vicious cycle of a deluding consumerist culture, primarily based on materialistic values and the rapid pursuit of pleasure.

Key words: McInerney, Youth, Alienation, Materialism, Childishness, Maturity.

Título en español: Obliteración de la madurez de Alison Poole en *Story of My Life* de Jay McInerney.

Resumen: La novela *Story of My Life* versa sobre las tribulaciones de Alison Poole, personaje principal y narradora de la misma, a medida que atraviesa una serie de experiencias en el seno del ambiente juvenil de ocio en el Manhattan de los años 1980. McInerney presenta los avatares de esta joven hedonista como evidencia del fracaso de la sociedad de consumo contemporánea, debido a la superficialidad y el materialismo que la caracterizan. Existe una subyacente visión inmadura, tanto de la identidad individual como de la sociedad, así como una noción ingenua o infantil de la realidad, que impiden el natural proceso de desarrollo personal de la protagonista. La obra muestra el conflicto interior experimentado por aquellos jóvenes que, llevados por su equivocada admiración hacia estilos de vida socialmente sugerentes, se ven atrapados en la espiral de una dinámica consumista ilusoria, centrándose exclusivamente en valores materiales y el cumplimiento rápido de sus deseos.

Palabras clave: McInerney, Juventud, Alienación, Materialismo, Puerilidad, Madurez.

Both Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis belong to that group of American novelists which has been known as New York's literary "brat pack". These writers achieved early success with their portraits of solitary characters moving about in the glimmering city scene of the 1980's. Ellis is exceptionally famous for his novels *Less Than Zero* (1985) and *American Psycho* (1991), in which the main ingredients are usually money, drugs, sex

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and violence, always involving young people. McInerney's *Story of My Life* (1988) similarly deals with the well-known theme of the troubled American youth, bearing a certain resemblance to his previous literary success, *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984). In that first novel, the main character is a successful young man called Jamie, who becomes trapped in a world of nightclubs and drugs. He eventually loses his job, his wife and his friends, only to wind up back in the beginning, having to start from scratch all over again. Likewise, the misadventures of Alison Poole, protagonist and narrator in *Story of My Life*, depict the experience of another youngster making the most of Manhattan's big time during the decade mentioned. In this case, we find a spoilt, but also frustrated, middle-upper-class girl who spends time roaming New York seeking handsome boys and controlled substances. However, she is actually craving to find an authentic meaning for life within the turmoil of her existence. McInerney focuses on her struggle to understand the mishaps, emotional conflicts and disagreeable experiences that have determined her life, concentrating on the eight-week period just before her twenty-first birthday. As the plot unfolds, we witness the decline of this self-proclaimed post-modern girl, as she slips further into alcoholism and cocaine dependency. Alison's first-person monologue describes her unhappy upbringing, escalating drug habit, and preoccupations with sex, fashion, and shallow stockbrokers. Abandoned by her father -a mature playboy who molested her as a child and poisoned her pet horse to obtain insurance indemnity-, she briefly seems to find motivation and naïve self-awareness in her acting lessons. Unfortunately, her sexually promiscuous, excessive and expensive lifestyle, along with her continuous cocaine abuse, serve as an obstacle for her personal development, and Alison's attempts to discover positive motivations in her life end up thwarted, just as her desire to seriously attend her drama school sessions. Suffering a progressive accumulation of problems, involving arguments with her boyfriend, financial troubles, and an ever-increasing cocaine addiction, she tops things off by having to go through an abortion. All these events subsequently bring her to a physical and mental collapse during her birthday celebration.

The present article proposes to take a closer look at the gradual process of Alison's decay, enhancing the frequent child-like reactions in her behaviour, in order to prove that the tribulations of this young hedonistic female suggest a criticism against contemporary consumerist society, which is likewise coming to pieces due to its superficial and materialistic doctrine -a feature which this novel also happens to have in common with Ellis' *American Psycho*, as Mike Grimshaw explains: "We desire that which we consume -and which in turn consumes us- because in it we see ourselves in both actual presence and potential actuality. Yet this act of consumption masks a deadly reality, for the violence of consumption is indicative of the violence with which we interact." (GRIMSHAW 2002).

In *Story of My Life*, the protagonist acquires implicitly infantile ideas regarding individual and social perspectives, determining her behaviour and handicapping her possibilities for a responsible self-realization and a truly coherent understanding of adult reality. A correct notion of adulthood requires a wider scope to interpret human relations, contrary to any narrow view of what these imply, and such knowledge can only develop in young people once they reject any limited or naïve pre-conception of life in favour of a much more rational approach. It is mainly in the dangerous aspects of Alison's lifestyle that she exhibits her simple-minded childishness, combined with an irresponsible penchant for pleasure, whilst

pursuing the immediate satisfaction of her whimsical desires. Such hazardous territories are none other than those related to sex and drugs. As a result, Alison's attitude leads her to an ever-growing state of self-alienation that impedes her psychological coming of age. The fact that the immature protagonist is turning twenty-one is quite significant in this sense, because it is precisely the legal age required for complete adulthood in New York State. Right from the start, Alison feels that her life is progressively becoming more chaotic and her habits are steadily enslaving her, so she proposes to seize full control of her affairs, aiming to firmly steer her destiny. This determination has its reasons if we consider her situation from a socially competitive point of view and bear in mind her surrounding environment, since Alison's behaviour is conditioned by several confrontations she engages in. Although she is very keen on seeking quick and complete satisfaction for every specific need or wish, she eventually becomes convinced that such a lifestyle may simultaneously be a threat to her personal independence, as Gregor Weibels-Balthaus suggests (2005: 296). Similarly, David Foster Wallace sees this submission or gradual loss of autonomy as a very common feature in people's general response to the different stimuli cast by modern media in all its forms, enslaving their will to choose:

We're conditioned accordingly. We have an innate predilection for visual stimulation, colored movement, a frenetic variety, a beat you can dance to [...] the breadth of our attentions greater as attention spans themselves shorten. Raised on an activity at least partly passive, we experience a degree of manipulation as neutral, a fact of life. However, wooed artfully as we are for not just our loyalty but our very *attention*, we reserve for that attention the status of a commodity, a measure of power; and our choices to bestow or withhold it carry for us great weight. (WALLACE 1988: 41)

Within Alison's particular social sphere relationships are characterized by a continuous re-assertion of dominion, especially in those areas where people depend on each other for the fulfilment of their respective desires. Moreover, these sceneries usually deal with money, sex and drugs, which are precisely her weak points, so Alison decides that she must handle each need in a way that ensures her self-determination amidst such circumstances. She acknowledges that her never-ending hunger for partying, taking drugs and having sex is a nerve-racking pleasure hunt that ultimately exhausts her, both physically and mentally, depriving her of the necessary energy to get organised and establish priorities: "My friends are still pretty much that way which is why I'm so desperate to get this check because if I don't then there's no reason to wake up early Monday morning and Jeannie will get home and somebody will call up and the next thing I know it will be three days from now with no sleep in between, brain in orbit, nose in traction." (MCINERNEY 1988: 8).²

In an attempt to self-analyse her personality, she becomes quite convinced that her free-spirited lifestyle is a consequence of the way she was brought up by her parents. Alison comfortably comes to this conclusion by simply recognizing that they have always secured her economic welfare, but assumes absolutely no responsibility in the matter as far as her own personal initiative is concerned. Quite the contrary, she amusedly admits never having been really employed or in the need of having her own job, while she cynically agrees

² All page references to the novel correspond to the same edition.

that a spoiled child will not be suitably prepared to face the world in terms of work: "Sorry, I just wasn't raised to work" (50). She quickly identifies the same family situation in the case of her friend Jeannie, reacting angrily when this girl's father refuses to give her any extra money. As a materially pampered child herself, Alison has always taken such benefits for granted and is outraged by his decision: "But it's like, these goddamned fathers, they give us everything for a while and then suddenly they change the rules. Like, we grow up thinking we're princesses and suddenly they're amazed that we aren't happy to live like peasants" (115).

We must bear in mind that Alison is essentially a product of her surroundings, during that significant historical period known as the Reagan era, "a time and place obsessed by money" (MARTIN 2002). Generally speaking, people were quite convinced that money could buy anything -if not everything-, and such is "how the social and moral temper of the 1980's serves to maintain an already complicated existence", as Anna Magnusson puts it (2000: 76). Money is precisely one of the issues that make Alison desperately aware of her lack of autonomy, because it renders her materially dependent on others and limits her freedom and self-determination. On several occasions, she painfully admits that she is unable to find a lasting solution for her mounting financial problems, as she begs pecuniary help from her boyfriend Dean, her ex-boyfriend Alex, her friend Mark in the solarium, and so on: "I call up my friend Didi to see if she can lend me the money... Which is when I go -what am I, crazy? I'm never going to get a cent out of Didi." (6-7). This feeling persists throughout the plot until the decisive moment when, perceiving the irony of her situation, she acquiescently uses the tuition funds from her father to cover the expenses of her abortion, thus strengthening her conviction that her dependence is the result of forces beyond her will. Essentially, she builds up the idea of being a victim, considering herself to be under the influence of others, who also happen to be in continuous pursuit of their own selfish pleasures, and starts to believe she cannot permanently emancipate herself moneywise. Alongside this, Jefferson Faye states that Alison's feeling of being at other people's mercy leads her to proceed with great care in all her social affairs: "Every one of her relationships is a power struggle in which she sees herself as the subject of aggressive behavior" (FAYE 1992: 129). This competition also characterises her social activities related to drug consumption, as she occasionally exasperates people when they come asking for some cocaine of her own provision, dominating them to a certain extent: "The next minute, Rebecca says, Alison, do you have any Valium?"(39). Such situations can often become quite tense, and even violent at some point: "Who else is holding drugs? Didi screams. Doesn't anybody but me buy drugs anymore? I know you all still do drugs, you cheap, sleazy bastards." (148).

Similarly, power clashes reach an almost obsessive degree in relation to Alison's sexual affairs. She is overtly determined to avoid being a mere object of sexual desire in the hands of any male chauvinist, and strives to keep any attempt of this kind at bay (WEIBELS-BALTHAUS 2005: 298). Hence, she criticises her friend Skip's contemptuous opinion regarding women: "He doesn't want to go out with anybody who might see through him, so he picks up girls like me. Girls he thinks will believe everything he says and fuck him the first night and not be real surprised when he never calls again" (5). By simply remarking how she utterly detests Skip's condescending behaviour and misogynistic attitude,

Alison shows she is quite self-confident in these matters at first. She disdainfully turns down separate proposals from a couple of strangers who call her for a date under Skip's recommendation, proving that she is in full charge of her sexual worth: "I'm like, I don't believe this. What am I? – the York Avenue Escort Service?" (9). Matters change, nonetheless, when Skip complacently tells her that Dean seems to be secretly dating someone else, making her initial self-assurance suffer a severe blow. Although more than Dean's betrayal itself, what really aggravates her is the shameful degradation she feels in front of Skip, damaging her pride and self-esteem: "I'm so pissed at Dean I could cut his dick off. Not because he went out with this bimbo and probably screwed her. I'm mad because he lied and put me in a position where Skip could humiliate me." (104). Ironically though, her sarcastic comments demonstrate that she basically agrees with a materialistic sexuality at this moment, evidencing that she accepts her consideration as a sexual object, rivalling with other females in identical condition: "Obviously the guy has no taste. That's what really gets me. If he thinks she's worth the price of a dinner, how can he truly appreciate me?" (106). However strange it may seem, this pseudo-commercial valuation does not stand for a denial of her dignity, since her role as a kind of sexual merchandise grants her a very solid sense of worth and supplies her with even greater possibilities of choice. Alison continues to uphold the idea that she is the one in charge when it comes to sex, and that she makes the final decisions on every possible occasion, procuring her own pleasure above all: "This isn't for you, I go, this is just for me. I'm still mad. I'm just horny." (110)

When Dean finally admits that he cheated her, she feels the need to prove that she can respond to such an outrage. The subsequent act of sexual intercourse between them allows her to recover both emotional and physical control, and therefore regain her autonomy. Such determination is most significant in the way she literally makes Dean have sex with her:

I pull on his cock like it's attached to a busted cigarette machine and I'm having a nicotine fit, he winces and gasps through his teeth, then I climb on top of him and hump and ride, he doesn't know how lucky he is, the jerk, horsewomen have muscles he never dreamed of, doesn't deserve, and after about ten minutes I come but I keep my mouth shut about it, this isn't one of those beautiful sharing experiences, this is something else entirely. (128)

Alison's almost sadistic description of the situation indicates how much she delights in taking the lead concerning sex, well in the line of female domination. As she physically controls Dean and submits him to her desire, the scene corresponds to what Elise Sutton hypothesises on the matter:

The woman who believes she is superior will permeate that attitude and thus she develops an aura of dominance and power... Deep down, men know that women are not their equals, no matter how politically correct our society tries to be. Women are different and mysterious to men. Women are sexual in a way that men do not understand. Women have a power that men do not understand and cannot resist. This female power is active during the courtship between a man and a woman...The female uses her sexuality (knowingly or unknowingly) and the man is helpless under her power. (SUTTON 2003: 65)

The moment he repeats her name at the peak of orgasm, she gleefully considers it an act of recognition towards her authority as well as her sexual self, and now feels she has successfully regained an independent sexual identity, no longer serving as somebody else's disposable object of sexual pleasure. Nonetheless, in spite of this momentary triumph, Alison usually encounters great difficulties to be in full control of her sexual life, as she is still amidst a male-dominated society in which women can only partially ensure their autonomy, according to Weibels-Balthaus (301). Alison herself acknowledges the deficiencies of her sexual relationships: "I try. I want this to be enough, just this. Just contact, just friction. But it's not." (128). She acridly admits she does not obtain sufficient personal satisfaction during her intimate encounters with men, no matter how much she seems to control the situation. To make things worse, there is also a competitive distrust between the sexes in modern times, coinciding with Christopher Lasch's opinion that "both men and women have come to approach personal relations with a heightened appreciation of their emotional risks." (194). Owing to the environment she lives in, where personal relations are governed by the same consumerist and individualist patterns of other human interactions, Alison inevitably tends to grow extremely cautious about the competitive nature of her relationships, including sexual ones. In this clashing of individual interests, she fights back as an individual herself, attempting to ensure her autonomy and emotional stability. Notwithstanding, the most common result is none other than a feeling of extreme loneliness and a progressive sense of alienation, simultaneously narrowing her view of the world. The same sensations, although magnified to a huge extent, take place in *American Psycho*, as human feelings bear no meaning within a hollow existence: "Love cannot be trusted. Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in... this was civilization as I saw it, colossal and jagged." (ELLIS 1991: 373).

Ellis' other famous novel, *Less Than Zero*, similarly emphasises on how a group of Los Angeles youngsters, already beyond their teenage years, undergo the same feelings of emptiness and identity loss in their surrounding environment. According to Sara Martin, "these people epitomize what would later be known as 'Generation X' in Douglas Coupland's popular phrase. The lives of the main character, Clay, and those of his well-to-do friends revolve around sex and drugs, in which they try to find the essence of a world that eludes them" (MARTIN 2002). In resemblance to this, McInerney's other works tend to deal with the disorientation and fragmentation of modern urban life by means of characters immersed in failed relationships, drug and alcohol addictions, or other self-detaching situations. *Bright Lights, Big City*, for example, presents the main character as a successful young writer in his early twenties, who works for an elite literary magazine, as he goes through a phase of self-delusion in order to numb the painful losses of his wife and mother. Cast into a frenetic cycle of work, late-night parties, and casual sex sustained by copious amounts of cocaine, he eventually emerges from the haze to finally confront his problems of alienation and lost self-identity (HUNTER 2006).

In *Story of My Life*, Alison herself regards this kind of displacement to be at the core of many disturbances in people, claiming that they ignore their true cravings and wishes, or simply fail to acknowledge such things (WEIBELS-BALTHAUS 2005: 301). She interprets this lack of self-understanding and acceptance as an important factor determining individual social problems and refers to childhood upbringing as the major source for such troubles.

It is undoubtedly true that traumatic social experiences at an early stage may alter a child's later capacity for social interaction, and J. P. Shonkoff reflects upon this by saying: "Human relationships, and the effects of relationships on relationships, are the building blocks of healthy human development" (SHONKOFF 2000: 86). This could very well explain how Alison's own sense of self-detachment was originated by the death of her horse "Dangerous Dan". Horseback riding was not only relevant, but also primordial in her childhood years, as an initial standpoint for her self-esteem and her view of social relationships -especially in connection with her father, towards whom she bears mixed feelings. The great significance she grants to those memories is obvious throughout her story, straight from the beginning: "When I was a kid I spent most of my time on horseback. I went around the country, showing my horses and jumping, until Dangerous Dan dropped dead. I loved Dan more than just about any living thing since and that was it for me and horses. That's what happens, basically, when you love something" (7). She even mentions such moments in the end, just before suffering the breakdown at her birthday party: "Toward the end of the endless party that landed me here I was telling the prep the story about Dangerous Dan... My father bought him for me and he cost a fortune. Back then my father bought anything for me. I was his sweet thing." (187).

With the death of her horse, Alison does not only endure the loss of something truly beloved, but also part of her identity. Riding was essential to develop her personality and forge her own self. The situation proved even more traumatic through her father's responsibility in the animal's demise. Alison partly blames him for bringing her childhood to a violent end, pulverizing her sense of wholeness and even her innocence. Her delusions begin precisely when she decides to try to free her alienated self and recover that long-lost feeling of completeness. Her deep desire is to be at one with the world around her and restore a kind of balance or harmony that has been broken ever since. This is also the purpose behind the acting lessons she decides to take up, allowing her to experience moments of profound self-realization:

I'm doing something true, I know I'm not just faking it this time and even though it's acting something I'm not really experiencing it's absolutely honest, my reaction, the sensations I'm feeling and I'm completely in my own reality, it's like dreaming, you know, or like riding when you feel almost like you and your horse are the same animal, taking your best jumper over a hard course and hitting everything perfectly. (46)

Riding on horseback, she found herself in the most favourable condition a child could possibly experience, which is to be emotionally at ease with the world surrounding. This is what her drama class also provides her with. In fact, Alison claims that acting is just as authentic as riding, and insists that practising such an activity makes her feel unleashed from the restrictions of her environment, creating a world of her own. She considers this as the basis of a state of wholeness or completeness. In this way, acting becomes more than simply an escape from a pointlessly hedonistic life, saturated with sex, cocaine, and consumerism, it also allows her to improve and recover what she considers the real, basic self of her childhood, from which she was separated by the death of Dangerous Dan. Alison

thus views acting as a therapy to stimulate self-realization, and harmonise her notions of self and society:

Acting is the first thing I've ever really wanted to do. Except for riding... So anyway, after horses I got into drugs. But acting, I don't know, I just love it, getting up there and turning myself inside out. Being somebody else for a change. It's like being a child again, playing something, making believe, laughing and crying all over the place, ever since I can remember people have been trying to get me to stifle my emotions but forget it -I'm an emotional kind of girl. My drama teacher has this great thing he always says -get in touch with your child, which is supposed to be the raw, uncensored part of yourself. Acting is about being true to your feelings, which is great since real life seems to be about being a liar and a hypocrite. (7-8)

For Alison, the rules that restrain social life in reality don't exist in the world of theatre. She is convinced that such restricting rules are incompatible with seeking complete gratification of one's desires, and invariably cause people to become displaced from their true selves. She regards the stage, not as a place that forces her to suppress her emotions, but quite the contrary, as a kind of refuge where she can show them freely. As a consequence, Alison develops the idea that she has discovered an "oasis" of authenticity in acting, in contrast to the emotional "desert" of true life. She acquires the deluding notion that children's natural desire to express their emotions and impulses is continuously altered and suppressed by conventions as they grow up to become social beings. Under the effect of such social rules, adults would supposedly forget those originally "true" emotions and urges, or simply learn to deny them and pretend they don't exist. In her view, socialisation is basically a negative process that neutralizes true personality, rendering the socialised self nothing but a mutilated version of the original one. This leads us to believe that acting is not merely, as Faye says, "the means by which she can release the pent-up emotions and feelings of betrayal she experiences" (128). Rather, it is her way of defying what she believes to be the alienating effects of social convention, because the stage offers a means enabling her to probe her inner self, or the child within, giving her the opportunity to liberate and restore the genuine emotions of that pre-socialised "somebody else" which she literally refers to. In Lasch's opinion, she would be trying to regain a long-lost "experience of narcissistic self-sufficiency and union with the world", caused by her overwhelming sense of alienation (167). This is also comparable to Ellis' view of the lack of authenticity in human existence, since the characters in his works serve the purpose of a kind of "funhouse mirror" in which we recognize ourselves as distorted; seeking the true reflection as relief and confirmation of the truthfulness of ourselves." (GRIMSHAW 2002).

Feeling that she lives in a world full of false or inauthentic people, Alison believes that a return to what she considers "true self" is also essential for communicating with others. She has the impression that the world is becoming dehumanised, and her narrative resembles the kind of literary atmosphere David Foster Wallace refers to as "Catatonic Realism", a world "in which suburbs are wastelands, adults automata, and narrators blank perceptual engines, intoning in run-on monosyllables the artificial ingredients of breakfast cereal and the new human non-soul" (WALLACE 1988: 37). As it turns out, beneath the intense activity of social life and its apparent closeness, people are mostly incapable of communicating, or not

willing to do so. This paradoxical condition is what makes closely intimate relationships virtually impossible for Alison, and causes her to suffer from extreme spiritual isolation. Unfaithfulness towards the truth is precisely what she frequently holds against her boyfriend, Dean: "I've grown up around liars and cheaters and I don't think there's any excuse for not telling the truth. I want to be able to trust you, but if I don't think you respect the truth, you know, then I'll just hit the road. You've got a nice vocabulary but I'm like, I insist on honesty. You should be able to tell me whatever you're feeling." (74).

According to Weibels-Balthaus, lack of communication is precisely what determines her relations with the two most important men in her life, her father and her boyfriend, since both seem always distant to her (2005: 304). Believing her father steers his personal matters under false, stereotyped emotions, she leaves a message requesting him "to get in touch with his child" (132), figuratively using her drama teacher's phrase beyond the literal sense of the expression, suggesting that her father should get to know himself better. As for Dean, she also perceives his not being emotionally authentic, and sadly admits he has lost his "spontaneity" and is turning "conventional", which in her eyes is equal to being alienated from one's true self. As a reaction against this, she confirms her trust in acting as a suitable remedy for her own alienated soul, whilst she alludes to socialization's crippling effect as well:

In my experience this is one big problem with older guys, they start to lose their spontaneity in their thirties, start saying what they're supposed to say instead of what they feel... Like, we're all pretty much raving maniacs as kids, but then some of us get all conventional. Not me, that's why I know I'm going to be a great actress some day, I'm totally in touch with my child. (73)

While seeking her father's support, Alison's communicative failures only serve to intensify her pitiable situation. Her evident lack of confidence is furthermore enhanced by his constant unavailability. Her attempts to talk to him are mostly in vain, since he is very difficult to get in touch with, and her disappointed reactions show that her father's absence is nothing but an example of neglect, as well as an insult to her familial approach: "I go, where's Dad? And she says he's in Cancun with a new bimbo. Which is great. Whenever I need my old man he's on some beach with a nineteen-year-old sex kitten. Story of his life." (178). The final recognition that the gap between them is definitely unbridgeable turns up at the very end, when she rings him up after her breakdown, only to see that he is just as evasive and undemonstrative as before: "He goes, I don't know what you're talking about." (188).

Alison's sense of social distance and her desire for intimate connection are very evident in her sexual affairs as well. Sexuality is a fundamental way of communicating in her life; however, it also leaves her dissatisfied most of the time, especially when it comes to sporadic encounters: "I hate being alone, but when I wake up in some guy's bed with dry come on the sheets and he's snoring like a garbage truck, I go - let me out of here." (5). Her desire for more meaningful contact also explains why she doesn't want her sex partners to use condoms - a practice that eventually causes her to contract a venereal infection or "social disease" as she prefers to call it (27): "You can't beat flesh on flesh. I want contact, right?"

Just give me direct contact and you can keep true love" (9). Strangely enough though, such contact has nothing to do with the idea of loving anybody, as she doesn't believe in love and even rejects the concept itself: "Did I say love? Wash my mouth out with soap." (33). In fact, her views would be downright nihilistic if it weren't for the fact that Alison's confessions likewise denote that there is a great need for human warmth and closeness beneath her voracious sexual appetite. The problem is that she does not realise how casual sex with partners she hardly knows, who are almost complete strangers, will not satiate her desire for proximity and communication. She generally prefers the anonymous, impersonal condition of such risky sexual practices instead of steady relationships, as indicated by her sex fantasy of "a harem of men to come and go as I command, guys as beautiful and faceless as the men who lay you down in your dreams" (15). Consequently, she experiences an even greater sense of distance and emptiness, revealing the sordid truth that there has not been any communication, apart from what may be simple physical contact. Such a feature can likewise be found in other literary works of the time, which cover the matter in a similar tone. Hence, Ellis also deals with sex as a poor substitute of human love, or rather, what is left of it, as merely a mechanical source of immediate pleasure. Once love has been discarded by the inhuman conditions of modern life, the resulting atmosphere adds to a holistic sense of alienation, which in turn generates a twofold effect, both on a collective as well as an individual scale:

For Ellis, being able to love is a secondary issue and in a 'hardbody' world love is a sign of weakness anyway. Lust, the taking and giving of a body and a self to be consumed for pleasure, the commodification of sexuality into an exchange of gratification and debasement is all we can seem to hope for. Alienated from each other we are now alienated from ourselves as well... Perhaps it is also evidence of a naivety that fails to truly understand the apocalyptic nature of contemporary existence. (GRIMSHAW 2002)

As Weibels-Balthaus observes, another component of Alison's individual detachment is her obsessive reliance on the telephone (306). The importance of this device becomes very significant when service to her apartment is restricted to calls coming from the outside: "Suddenly I'm cut off from all my friends and delivery service from the deli" (114). Her nearly pathological dependency on phones, along with the implicit lack of self-confidence underlying her complaints, openly reveals her fear of becoming alienated. Such an experience becomes even more oppressive as she eventually depends on answering machines to get her messages through, taking her to a point of exasperation; once again she metaphorically criticises the lack of human touch in her world, as she places people and devices on the same level: "story of my life, talking to machines" (124). In similar terms, a special concern towards how technological development may alter human existence is of substantial importance in the works of other contemporary writers, such as Ellis. Thus, the element of technology as a dehumanising agent can be found in *American Psycho*, contributing to the composition of a false reality: "a world where reality can be digitally, cinematically, ontologically altered at whim, a world where 'better' and 'worse' are claimed not to matter anymore because no one cares about those meanings. Rather, we adapt to change in a world without truth." (GRIMSHAW 2002). Ironically, not only do the telephone and answering

machine turn out to be indispensable means of communication for Alison, but they also stand out as symbols of her feelings of distance and isolation from her environment. Speaking directly to others in person, on the other hand, does not necessarily imply success in communicating either; what is more, this type of conversation is often inconsistent and erratic, and only emphasizes her alienated condition. To make things worse, coherent communication is especially thwarted when drugs are involved, which is the most occasional case. For example, on returning to her apartment one day in the afternoon, she finds her sister, Rebecca, mechanically arguing with Didi after spending the previous night taking drugs and partying together. Their non-stop blabbering seems very funny at first, but it also brings Alison to reflect upon her own drug habits: "I love coke conversations. They're so enlightening. I mean, do I sound like that? It's almost enough to make you swear off drugs forever [...] If you don't like the topic of conversation, just wait a minute and you'll get a new one. On the other hand, it never really changes at all. It's like a perpetual motion thing." (38-39).

As the girls talk, many subjects are brought up on end, but are also discarded very quickly, always taking the conversation back to the beginning in a vicious cycle, and clearly giving a powerful notion of getting nowhere. Their prosaic, narrow-minded, and egocentric dialogue certainly makes Alison feel superior, yet it also spurs her own self-introspection, as it makes her wonder if she actually sounds "like that" and urges her to think she might equally be incapable of communicating meaningfully in such conditions. As regards Alison's own manners of expression, considering the particular kind of jargon and tone she uses, her speech is very realistic since it corresponds to a careless young person who irrepressibly tends to say the first thing that comes to his/her mind. McInerney himself admits that Alison's girl-about-town antics and her vapid argot were modelled on true people he had met at the time (REES 2008), and it is beyond doubt that the protagonist's language denotes a highly altered emotional state. Although many of her utterances are simple, short and abrupt phrases, expressed quickly one after another in sequence, Alison also uses continuous non-stop paragraphs to tell us the things that happen to her, all contained within a strongly self-centred discourse, deriving into a communication very much in unison with her touch-and-go lifestyle. Her speech is studded with useless interjections such as "like" and other informal expressions, such as "go" and "goes" -meaning "say" and "says"-, as well as short interrogatives such as "right?" serving as multiple-use question tags. All these words, alongside her obsessively repetitive slogan "story of my life", prove she is directly and spontaneously telling us her experiences in a nervous and emotionally altered tone. This true-to-life narrative formula adds credibility to her situation, involving nightlife partying and drug abuse, a very common problem among young Americans both during the 1980's and 1990's, as Jennifer Robison points out:

By the mid-80s, the introduction of crack cocaine turned youth drug use into a truly terrifying issue. Crack was cheap, plentiful and hideously addictive [...] The use of methamphetamines (often called "crystal meth" or "meth") is relatively new among teens. A stimulant, meth creates paranoia, hallucinations and repetitive behavior patterns. Long-term use can lead to toxic psychosis. Recent PDFAs studies found that use by high school students more than doubled between 1990 and 1996. (ROBISON 2002)

The overall effects of cocaine are faithfully represented in Alison's general condition. On a short-term basis, it may cause extreme anxiety and restlessness, whereas in the long run it produces excessive alertness, watchfulness, impaired judgment, impulsiveness, and compulsively repeated acts (SALOMÉ *et al* 2000: 461). But McInerney's realistic portrait of how it affects language goes even further, as research has proved that "The higher functions which determine the content of speech as opposed to its syntactic structure, can certainly be adversely affected by drugs" (GAWEL 1981: 51). Moreover, drug abuse causes language deficiencies related to acculturation that vary by gender, according to recent studies: "Gender will moderate the relationship between linguistic acculturation and pro-drug norms, intentions, and use: the influence of linguistic acculturation on pro-drug norms, intentions to use substances, and substance use will be stronger for girls than for boys." (MARSIGLIA *et al* 2006: 11).

Alongside this, the pathetic exchange of gibberish between Didi and Rebecca also convinces Alison of other negative effects narcotics bring about, such as making people become so self-absorbed that they tend to lose touch with their human surroundings. Hence, drug abuse intensifies any underlying egocentric tendency to a degree that makes an individual emotionally indifferent towards others. With regards to Didi, the effect is ultimately innocuous; at worst she is a nuisance, and at best a laughable wretch, naïve and self-deluded. However, Rebecca's severe loss of empathy is much worse, even propitiating moments of danger, as it is proved by her cruel and indolent attitude during the dramatic argument that finally leads her boyfriend, Mannie, to attempt suicide: "Mannie screams Rebecca's name and then I don't know, suddenly he disappears, he's just gone... It takes me a minute to realize we're on the sixth floor and Mannie's jumped out of the window" (161). Thus, Alison plainly observes how utterly destructive the isolating effect of drugs can be. The way their influence turns people egocentric and apathetic, rendering them incapable of communicating openly or meaningfully, is another one of those communicational deficiencies that contribute to her isolation from the environment. This alienating drawback is the main reason why she gradually tries to recover the ability to communicate through acting, believing she is re-discovering that supposedly "real" world she previously lost. Ironically, however, what she actually does is hide in a world of fiction, or fantasy, which only seems real to her because she can express her feelings without restraint and "be herself", expecting others to do the same. As a consequence, depending on fictional situations turns out to be much like resorting to drugs in order to inhibit social restrictions, and the results can be equally frustrating. Such a mistaken reliance on fantasy takes place on two specific occasions within the novel, during the subsequent Truth-or-Dare game sessions. These moments are precisely when the contradictory ambivalence of her character reveals itself most clearly. Since things get out of hand, the situation ends up frightening Alison and forces her to choose an absolute reality rather than a fictionalised one. Basically, she does not completely surrender to the fiction of living in a world governed by the rules of a game, but retains the consciousness of a reality outside that world. Even if she willingly enters this fantasy world at first, she struggles to retain her critical viewpoint within it. As the second session unfolds, she discovers that her friends have completely submitted to the fiction of living in a party-game world where nearly everything is allowed. She then

becomes horrified as her sister tries to seduce her boyfriend during the game. The incident warns her against the ethics of the real world being inhibited by the rules of a ludicrous pastime activity, leading her to quit the game at the climactic instant of emotional tension: "So I get up and go to the bathroom while Truth-or-Dare is raging around me. This is even worse than the fucking derby." (156-157). She returns from that fantasy world back into reality, in an attempt to recover realistic criteria, essential for a proper understanding of her circumstances. Her experience of the game proves just how risky it can be to completely fulfil one's fantasies, since it may lead to a complete loss of one's sense of reality. The incident during the second session also brought her mind back to a very similar scene that had taken place long before, when she once sat in a hot bathtub together with Alex, Rebecca, and Trent -her sister's lover at that moment: "Anyway, we're all in that condition where you can't tell where the water stops and you begin, it's like the same warm ooze, the four of us in the hot tub drinking Crystal wrecked on Quaaludes and we're like joking around about having an orgy and the next thing I know I feel a hand fishing around between my legs..." (155).

It was a similar situation at that time, but involving drugs as well, as they were amidst a world free from the limits of factual reality. In such a place of refuge the rules of behaviour belonging to real life cease to exist, making her and the rest able to act out their sex fantasies without fearing reprimand. However, just as in the Truth-or-Dare game, we observe again how Alison gives way to fantasy only up to a certain degree, and keeps clinging on to an outer reality whose rules should not be broken. That is why she eventually leaves the tub, in order to restore the balance between the real and the fantasized, as Weibels-Balthaus indicates (2005: 312).

After experiencing so many situations of the kind, Alison gradually develops the idea that the ability to tell the difference between truth and imagination is disappearing from her surroundings. Since her acquaintances and associates do not seem aware of the possible outcome their actions might have, she believes they are progressively losing the faculty of distinguishing the two concepts. But it must be pointed out that she herself is also involved in the aforementioned dynamics, because by living on the edge of real life, resorting to so many self-deluding pleasures of a purely superficial or materialistic type, as well as using narcotics to disguise reality, she eventually becomes less capable of telling the fantasized world from the other (131). This makes her growingly insecure and magnifies her detachment, as she desperately grasps an essential referent for what is real, but does so by avoiding her friends and the activities they indulge in. The result is ironically the opposite of her initial objective, which was to be in control of her reality and be an active part of it, interacting positively with others:

Some impulses you should stifle, right? I never used to think so, I've always done whatever I felt like, I figured anything else and you're a hypocrite like I told Dean, but I don't know, here in the middle of this ugly Truth or Dare session watching my sister grab my boyfriend's dick, thinking about her and Alex back then, thinking about some of the shit I've done recently, I'm beginning to wonder if a little stifling is such a bad thing. (156)

Stephanie Girard sees this as the basic conflict of “betweenness” that takes place in modern life (1996: 161). On the other hand, Grimshaw views the matter as a wilful loss or disappearance of identity in the modern technologically-based world, stating that young people may even deliberately give way to such anonymity in order to avoid the potential sufferings the real world can bring about, seeking refuge in a more artificial or fictitious reality, as found in Ellis’ works (GRIMSHAW 2002). Similarly, in her attempt to be in full control of her circumstances, Alison moves away from the people who could cause her to be trapped in the activities that tend to enslave her, but such a manoeuvre also implies isolating herself and increasing her sense of alienation. Alongside this, we must also bear in mind that Alison tends to interpret her circumstances according to the self-conjured ideas that respond to her own personal logic or convenience, in an attempt to find an explanation for her problems. It must be remembered how she retains her faith in primary human instinct, believing it is a kind of ideal condition, necessary for true understanding and communication. This, of course, refers to that previously mentioned pre-socialised self, suppressed by the standards of civilized society. Consequently, she adopts a simplistic view of an initial state of authenticity, or even innocence, which becomes corrupted by the rules of society as people are brought up to act as adults. Simple-minded perspectives of the like, forging a character’s particular view of reality, are common in both McInerney’s and Ellis’s works, as a number of critics have pointed out (CLARY *et al* 2003: 477). The belief in this honest condition previous to social education is a resort to a minimalist pattern of behaviour, leading Alison to uphold this principal very firmly because it makes sense to her, seeming practical and useful as well. It becomes essential for her to recover that uncorrupted condition, thus justifying her rejection of whatever is socially conventional, alongside her rebellious attitude and her never-ending search for complete satisfaction. Teresa Brennan even sees it as a distortion of her sense of survival:

From this perspective, more and more, the “life process” is conducted under the auspices of a fantasy that gradually make living into a series of demands for instant gratification, and competitive evaluations, as well as a means of staying alive... They are ends in themselves, not only for the sake of the life process, but for the demonstration of how far one has succeeded in the aims of having it all come to you, of beating the competition, of securing one’s personal fortress against the real or imaginary hostility of the vanquished. To put this issue in new terms, the life process has ceased to be primarily a matter of the body’s survival, and become a matter of the mind’s realization of its infantile impulses (BRENNAN 1997: 223)

Gerhard Hoffmann finds this also true for the viewpoint in *American Psycho*, since he concentrates on the problem as resulting from a sense of chaos and confusion, in relation to what is real and imaginary (HOFFMANN 2005: 636). Such a feeling is similar to Alison’s bewildered condition, since the result of all her efforts is a growing spiral of confused actions, ranging from struggling to command a given situation to depending on others in order to momentarily cover some need, as she simultaneously considers those people to limit her self-determination. When she tries to do without them, however, she feels the need to communicate honestly, and interprets the world according to rudimentary ideas about childhood innocence that must be regained. Acknowledging her life’s degree

of chaos, she attempts to stabilize her restless existence and clings firmly to authenticity as if it were a code: "I feel really strong about always being honest no matter what. That's my personal code, basically -do anything you'd be willing to admit, and always tell the truth." (53). Still, she occasionally contradicts that principle by concealing the truth or favouring "a little white lie" (156), and even resorts to plain dishonesty when seeking some kind of revenge, so absolute sincerity is not always her policy. Although being honest and speaking outwardly -as in her drama school lessons- are the tactics she believes will curb her meaningless, superficial lifestyle, her reiterated phrase "story of my life" only indicates an ever-increasing frustration, verifying the futility of her methods. She repeatedly uses this expression up to eleven times throughout the one hundred, eighty-eight pages of the text, either referring to herself or others, as she complains about how things never really change. Such an obsessive remark also indicates the desperate impossibility of escaping her situation, and the continuous sense of going nowhere. Faye agrees that the protagonist "has all the subconscious pieces to assemble a complete picture, but lacks the fundamental self-awareness necessary to understand why she cannot function with any success in society, why she remains an exile"(127). As a consequence of all this pressure, she undergoes a progressive emotional strain characterised by repetitive symptoms of physical weakness, which will lead to her eventual collapse. When this happens at her birthday party, Alison finally gives up her attempts to organise her life and turns to find a solution through a drug rehabilitation program: "I crawl over to the phone and call out, call this number, the last four digits spell out H-E-L-P on the dial." (186). This program is sponsored on a business card that appears at an early stage in the novel; Alison superciliously offered it to Didi as a conceited suggestion to solve her pitiable condition, shortly after Jeannie jokingly gave it to her at the end of a non-stop night of fun (40). The card ends up making a round-trip back to Alison after Didi gives it to Rebecca, and she in turn hands it to her sister at the critical moment of the second Truth-or-Dare session. Apart from bouncing back at her, the card's boomerang movement enhances Alison's merry-go-round, revolving-door existence, as it makes clear that she is not getting anywhere on her own. Finally seeing them as unfeasible, she resigns to her simplistic principles of complete honesty and satisfaction as a practical life pattern, subsequently using the card to break that vicious cycle of nothingness and head for a Minnesota drug-treatment centre instead, as Weibels-Balthaus clearly states (2005: 318-319).

As observed, McInerney's novel concentrates on all the unsuccessful attempts made by the main character in pursuit of a rational balance between her personal desires and the circumstances determining her existence. The entire plot moves around Alison's ups and downs during her proposed self-realization and the ultimate failure of such a process, turning out to be incomplete at the end. The author insists that her struggle for control in the midst of her chaotic lifestyle, relying on her pipe dream of returning to a child-like perspective in order to solve her alienated condition, is not only ineffective, but also contrary to the natural process of maturing. Although her idealization of childhood in terms of innocence and truthfulness may somewhat relate to that natural human goodness once postulated by the European Enlightenment or the American Transcendentalists, it is nonetheless an erroneous perspective, excessively naïve and simplistic for the purpose of individual self-development, especially within the complex and elaborate circumstances of the modern

human social sphere. Everything happening to Alison during the two-month period before her birthday party serves as irrefutable proof of how unsuitable her approach is. If we look closely, her material problems essentially converge into three basic financial issues, which happen to be her tuition fee, the rent for her apartment and the unexpected cost of her abortion. The difficulties she faces while trying to solve them are fundamentally related to superficial matters and conventions linked to consumerism and a materialistic society. In this way, the problems themselves can also be seen as direct or indirect consequences of living up to standards in such an environment, and are either due to her own wishes or someone else's desire for rapid gratification, deriving from a kind of childish impulse in most cases. Furthermore, the desperate steps she takes to soothe her dire economy are instances of a child-like behaviour as well, plainly connecting with the infantile nature of her self-conjured view of life and human relationships. Such attempts only increase her dependency and vulnerability, ultimately leading her to a complete loss of control, since Alison ends up resigning to her would-be positions of power and becomes more dependent on others, as she recklessly counteracts her lack of income by borrowing small amounts of money (36), letting her friends pay the restaurant and telephone expenses (124), or even by stealing from them (132). Apart from limiting her self-reliance and autonomy, her actions also force her to break her supposed code of honesty on several occasions, and a growing sense of guilt makes her intuitively conscious of this. Hence, she feels troubled about lying to her younger sister, Carol (13), becomes dizzy and sick when she sells her grandmother's pearl necklace -a symbol of *purity*- (173), and turns rather sceptical when she finally covers the cost of her abortion by means of her tuition funds. However, she never gets to comprehend the full extent of such actions, which only serve to intensify the vicious cycle she is already trapped within: "So I make an appointment for the next week and I use the tuition money which is kind of ironic because last month I used my supposed abortion money for tuition and now it's the other way around." (178).

Again, we must remember that Alison moves about during the Reagan years in America. Both McInerney and Ellis have portrayed such a characteristic social period in great detail in their works, above all as an expression of decadence regarding the American Dream and all the conventional paraphernalia surrounding it. Their writings focus on an impulsive self-destructive tendency taking place on an individual level, as Grimshaw observes in Ellis' works: "What Ellis warns us is that decline is resultant upon our decisions. We choose the antithesis. We desire it. We create our own destruction. The inevitability of decline is the inevitability of our choices in a superficial, amoral world." (GRIMSHAW 2002). Richard Gray in turn views the issue from a more global perspective, and deals with present American society's tendency towards decline as an outcome of the past twenty years' history, and a product of paranoia: "American culture may have become internationally dominant but the US itself has been internationalized; America may be the sole remaining superpower, but it is a superpower that seems haunted by fear -fear, among other things, of its own possible impotence and potential decline." (GRAY 2009: 128).

In any case, McInerney, just as Ellis, prefers a more individualised setting for the problem in his works. He tends to use the Freudian inner conflict that takes place between our innate yearnings and our desire for pleasure on one hand, pitted against the demands of society and our responsibility towards our fellow citizens on the other. The result is the

invariable “assertion that civilization itself leads to our discontents... It also thwarts our deepest, most intimate aspirations for joy and fulfilment.” (RAKFELDT 2006: 1825). Relating to this idea, Alison’s immature view of reality in *Story of My Life* makes no distinction between absolute satisfaction of desire and proper self-realisation in society. She ignores that self-denial and the ability to curb one’s impulses are essential ingredients for a truly mature development of personality, as well as basic features of adult behaviour. Alongside this, she never realises that the innocence, authenticity and fulfilment of all wishes that she associates with childhood are impossible to restore and that such an ideal view of infantile truthfulness is incompatible with adulthood. The author makes special emphasis on her failure to understand this in the title of the last chapter, by means of the folk song “Good Night Ladies” in the title, which she uses to show that Alison definitely fails to acknowledge such facts and stubbornly continues her destructive process of carefree fun and entertainment. Both her abortion and her birthday party work together in this culminating chapter as a conjunct exhibit of her immaturity. While the abortion is being performed, Alison intends to relieve the pain by trying to remember a nursery rhyme from her childhood: “So I try to remember that rhyme we used to say in school -Miss Mary Mack Mack Mack all dressed in black black black, but I draw a blank on the rest.” (181). The abortion itself, as a rejection of motherhood, also stands for a refusal to accept adult life and its corresponding responsibilities, which is evidenced by her resorting to a nursery rhyme during the process. By doing so, Alison attempts a return to her childhood the moment she faces an adulthood issue, but fails to remember the words to the rhyme, indicating that the innocence and honesty of her infancy are out of her reach and cannot be recovered. Thus, McNerney insists on the fact that the character’s strategy of returning to that ideal condition of innocence is both a proof of her immaturity, as well as an unsuitable and futile method for dealing with matters in adult life. Frank De Caro coincides with this view of the nursery rhyme’s use, as he points out that: “her failure to remember suggests a dangerous fragmentation, an inability to connect, to put things together in a meaningful way and mirrors the disconnected and immature world of which she is very much a part” (DE CARO 1991: 243). Associating her abortion with a nostalgic longing for childhood innocence constitutes an unconscious denial of mature progression and thereby evidences the limitations of her transition from adolescence to adulthood. The climactic culmination of her crisis exhibits definite proof of this failure; Everett -one of the guests at her birthday party- proudly and ceremoniously declares: “Today... Alison is an adult... she’s not a girl now she’s a woman.” (184), but the celebration concludes in physical and psychological breakdown for the protagonist, forcing her to surrender to the fact that she cannot handle her problem-studded life and is utterly incapable of looking after herself on her own. It may even be said that her progress towards maturity has also been aborted, just as her pregnancy. In the end, her “coming of age” is not only shallow but also a fraud, since it becomes an ironic regression rather than any kind of step forward in her personal development.

One more clue to the persistence of the character’s immature or infantile attitude in the novel is provided by an important element the author uses in order to explore the consequences of her childish primeval ideal, which is present in the Truth-or-Dare experience Alison undergoes. Basically, it is very similar to any kind of playful activity for children, as it is a make-believe pastime whose rules establish a fantasy situation as substitute for

reality. However, it is also faithful to truth, just as Alison's ideal rules of conduct demand: "Everybody has to swear at the beginning to tell the truth, because otherwise there's no point. When it's your turn you say either Truth-or-Dare. If you say truth, you have to answer whatever question you're asked. And if you say dare, then you have to do whatever somebody dares you to do." (65). Although Alison does not become fully aware of it, the Truth-or-Dare game represents a fictitious society that works according to her own personal code, since it encourages the players to enact their own private impulses, whilst it requires them to tell the absolute truth about everything. The game also creates a social environment in which individual interests prevail to an extreme: In real life, the rules of conduct are designed to preserve social order by cautiously limiting each individual's range of action and influence, whereas the rules of the game stimulate de-stabilizing social behaviours by periodically allowing people's wills and desires to predominate over others. As De Caro points out, the Truth-or-Dare games "suggest the immaturity of Alison's world; the children's game has been upgraded to an adult form, yet this merely amplifies its potential for playing with disruptive actions, retaining in essence the childish fascination for daring others and coercing others to say what they would otherwise not." (DE CARO 1991: 247).

The author makes use of the alternative social model of the game as one that follows the views of an unwary child, in terms of earnestness and instant fulfilment of desire, showing the drawbacks to such a society and its inadequacy for human development. As the players or members of the imaginary society end up harming one another in pursuit of their wishes, an increasingly stressful situation builds up among them, which in turn becomes impossible to overcome due to the limited communication they are subject to, owing to the fact that there is no chance for dialogue or discussion. This is something that also corresponds to Alison's situation, due to her constant communicative difficulties and isolation. Using this social model based on a child's interpretation of reality, McInerney proves that such a proposal must inevitably lead to disaster due to its conflicting nature. Alison's story likewise confirms that the youngster's notion of reality becomes jeopardised by the influence of contemporary consumerism, as it highlights an excessive reliance on fantasy that results from a young person's child-like response to the exigencies of the environment. McInerney thus attempts to portray the inner conflict experienced by immature individuals such as Alison, who are misled by a supposedly fashionable lifestyle, and caught within the vicious cycle of a deluding fast-lane culture primarily based on materialistic values, as well as an irrepressible need for rapid pursuit of pleasure. Simultaneously, he strives to make clear that such an unstable social model requires a more realistic and mature ethical approach which can effectively meet the demands of social life by setting a balance between fulfilment and negation of desire, as well as between the individual self and the world surrounding. In other words, the influence of modern-day mass media and publicity, by emphasizing on money and material satisfaction, makes it ever more difficult for the young and restless to come to terms with society and their own selves. Furthermore, the imperishable nature of this viewpoint proves true for any oncoming generation, as it not only suits the youth of the 1980's, but also remains valid for the young people of today with identical meaning. Basically, youngsters nowadays experience the same troubles as those of the past five decades, as Western society progressively developed its presently massive consumerist nature. The teenage generations of the late 1950's and early 1960's

were the first to gain the attention of their elders through rebellious remarks and attitudes, making clear that they had something to say, although not knowing exactly what it was most of the time. Unruly behaviour was generally the most common feature, and dissolute lifestyles involving sporadic sex and drug consumption became disturbingly usual by the mid 1970's, especially in big cities. The urges related to instant pleasure-seeking and the appeal for material satisfaction followed immediately afterwards, so by the second half of the 1980's a desire to keep up appearances and give the impression of withholding a certain social status did the rest. Many American teenagers today are fully aware that their parents used drugs and had sexual encounters when they were young, finding such activities as natural in the process of growing up and approaching adulthood, but have no references or guidelines as to what it takes to be a consciously mature human being. The consumerist and materialist tendencies some parents themselves cultivate do not make things any better, serving as a poor example when it comes to educating their children, not to mention the ill effects of their frequently prejudiced ideas concerning social status and appearances, which they likewise try to live up to at all costs.

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