

“HERE WE ARE AGAIN, ALL MESSED UP AND NO PLACE TO GO”:

THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF *BRIGHT
LIGHTS, BIG CITY*

By Emily Siegel

Bright Lights, Big City . . . succeed[s] in
capturing, in fewer than 200 pages, an entire
decade. -*Salon Magazine*

The critics hailed *Bright Lights, Big City* as the novel and its author Jay McInerney as the spokesman for the eighties generation. Darryl Pickney looked to *Bright Lights, Big City* to “have the atmosphere of period pieces. McInerney writes of the early Eighties, when the clubs he names were out of fashion to the partygoers who made them. That they seem of their

periods demonstrates how time has accelerated, or how changes in style can make for distances” (8). Although *Bright Lights, Big City* has certainly defined the eighties, with the exception of certain cultural references it could take place during any time period. Time has accelerated but changes in morals and societal ideas have plateaued since McInerney’s novel came out in 1984. The novel is not representative of a time period, but rather a group of people that possess distinct characteristics and who are still a part of society today.

The generation of the eighties whom the novel represents consisted of the upper middle class early twenties intellectuals. They were not necessarily yuppies, but those who had received a solid education and had some degree of means. They were the hopes for the future, not the rich but rather the privileged, the lucky, the affluent. This group hasn’t gone extinct; if anything it has only grown more prominent. *Bright Lights, Big City* speaks to this specific niche of people and as long as this niche exists, which it clearly still does, the novel will continue to be relevant and have a feeling of timelessness. Today’s young intellectuals can relate to the novel’s main character who says, “You are the stuff of which consumer profiles – American Dream: Educated Middle-Class Model – are made” (151). McInerney addresses something for this young up and coming group that not many have done; he wrote a novel about them that, contrary to what many critics think, wasn’t tacky, trite, or soapoperaesque but rather confronts their very real psychological turmoil. The novel examines issues of identity, performance of identity, acceptance of failure, coming to terms with the death of a family member, but also the search for love – which deep down is the underlying reason for all of his characters’ actions. McInerney understood what this group was going through, so he wrote a novel about a romantic and innocent character living in an age where romance is dead and dreams are left unattained. McInerney leaves his main character nameless and the novel is told in the second person perspective, so I will follow the tradition of most reviewers and refer to him as “You”.

During the time that *Bright Lights, Big City* was published, there were some people who simply didn't understand it. They felt it was a yuppie novel with a whiney main character. Yuppies flocked to *Bright Lights, Big City*; a novel that was in fact making fun of them. They took it as a guidebook for the nightlife in New York City. They wanted to be McInerney's "You"; they wanted to do cocaine all over the city and bring their sunglasses out at night because they knew they'd be walking home from the club in the daylight. But if these intellectuals are so intellectual why don't they get it? Why don't they see that this book is making them look like utter morons and disproving the worth of an Ivy League education? Because the eighties generation, much like today, was defined by lying to oneself in order to avoid admitting failure. All the characters of *Bright Lights, Big City* are guilty of this, and apparently its readers were as well. They didn't want to read into the true meanings of the text. They wanted to party! They wanted to hang out with McInerney at the Odeon, the trendiest restaurant at the moment in New York City. "You" felt, "Your presence here is only a matter of conducting an experiment in limits, reminding yourself of what you aren't"(4). They saw "You" as one of them when in fact he wasn't at all, he had just somehow gained a pass to their world and was able to observe and comment. They only cared to see the book on its most superficial level, because reading in too deep would have caused them to reconsider their lifestyle, and who would want to do that?

The problem with understanding the novel at the time of its origin was the hype that was associated with it. Jay McInerney became a household name. He was hip and good looking and the media took advantage of that. Very rarely do authors succeed with their first novel and he was the exception to the rule. Unfortunately people associate creativity with suffering, hardship, and rejection, and since he did not seem to have endured much of anything, critics looked toward him with disdain. He came to be called "the most resented character in American literature today" (Beachy 28). He became a feature in the gossip columns and eventually he received

more fame for his personal life than his literary achievements. Poor McInerney published a book that was misunderstood; or rather people turned a blind eye toward its deeper meaning. He says in an interview with Sanford Pinsker in 1986:

I was very shocked when magazines talked about the book as a wacky, fun-filled romp through the fast lane. Again, I thought I was doing something else . . . advancing a modest critique of an age in which an actor is the President, in which fashion models are asked for their opinions, in which getting into a nightclub is seen as a significant human achievement. Apparently, the book hasn't been read that way (108).

Displaying the book in this fashion was more marketable. Many people were attracted to the way "You" was able to glide swimmingly into the glamour of the rich and powerful; they were jealous and mesmerized by it all at once. If they addressed how "You" was despairing in the world of the elite it would have crushed their idealized notion of the upper crust.

What McInerney grasps about this group is the feeling of being lost and alone. "You" voices the interior insecurities of the promising youth. When a person has so many options and so many advantages sometimes it is easy to wonder what it will all lead to. The novel hones in on "You", a character who speaks for those who dream big, who want to push through the difficulties because they hope that their affluent normalcy can give them the jump they need, but in the back of their heads they know it might not be enough. So they spiral. They change focus and look toward the attainable good time. "You" doesn't enjoy the nightlife in New York but he is attached to the fact that while he's there he doesn't have to think about real life. While out one night he thinks, "It's somewhere past midnight. Anything that starts now is not going to end at a reasonable hour. You think about slipping out and heading home. All sorts of beneficial effects are rumored to accrue from a good night's sleep. On the other hand, you wouldn't mind a taste of that toot. Just enough

to boost your morale” (48). Deep down staying out at the club is not what he wants but leaving means the end of the escape. He wants to extend it as long as possible.

For people like “You”, when rejection comes at them they use their means to dance with disaster. They choose ruin because they can. It is not something they can slip into; they look it in the eye and say, “Let’s see what all the fuss is about.” Darryl Pinckney writes about the youth at the time that, “It is almost a rite of passage, this wandering into the underside of life, replacing the campus as discovery and initiation. The young no longer have their lost weekend in the city. The city, as the theater of experience, the refuge, the hiding place, has in turn been replaced by an abstraction, the fast lane.” New York City is not only a place of opportunity but also a place of degradation. When opportunity has reached its limit, degradation is always available. This group graduates with a fine education and enters into menial jobs but there is room for upward mobility and they will get there. But what if they don’t? *Bright Lights, Big City* shows us that they probably won’t and that it’s okay.

The journey of “You” to this acceptance is filled with drugs, uncertainty, and laziness. It is also filled with lies because one must lie to themselves and others about what they cannot achieve. “You” thinks to himself while out at a club, “Without getting too specific you imply that your job is extremely demanding and important. In the past you could often convince yourself as well as others of this, but your heart is no longer in it” (46). “You” is not alone in putting on a successful persona in order to dissuade the pity of others; those of the young intellectual group who haven’t lived up to their own expectations do the same. It is not until one comes to terms with the fact that they may not achieve their dreams that they finally reach the point where they can accept it, move on, and start leading a life that is going somewhere.

What is striking about *Bright Lights, Big City* is that it is still applicable today. It is usually viewed as a novel that is incredibly representative of the 1980’s. The reason it still resonates is because many of the morals and social aspects of today began to appear around the time of the novel’s debut. Humanity as a whole is still narcissistic.

People still choose to live in the moment and only care about their own wellbeing. The upper middle class intellectuals are the same, if not more prominent. The group of underemployed young people has only gotten larger due to the emphasis on a college education in order to succeed. We can look to *Bright Lights, Big City* as a voice for our insecurities and quarter life crises. Currently Josh Schwartz (the creator of hit television shows such as *The O.C.* and *Gossip Girl*) is turning the novel into a movie. *Bright Lights, Big City* is a critique of a different decade but what no one could have predicted was that McInerney's observations would continue to resonate in 2010. McInerney writes in a recent article for New York Magazine entitled "Yuppies in Eden" that, "...yuppie culture has become the culture, if not in reality, then aspirationally. The pods have pretty much taken over the world. The ideal of connoisseurship, the worship of brand names and designer labels, the pursuit of physical perfection through exercise and surgery – do these sound like the quaint habits of an extinct clan?" What McInerney is pointing out is that we haven't changed all that much. With the exception of technological advances, human beings as a whole haven't really improved morally. Thirty years ago people were focusing on the present and that hasn't done us any good. *Bright Lights, Big City* has some heavy lessons in it that would be beneficial for young people of today to inspect more closely.

McInerney's talent, intelligence, and young writer exuberance is perceptible throughout the novel. He didn't know his book would be a bestseller, he says in the Sanford Pinsker interview, "Nobody was more surprised that *Bright Lights, Big City* hit something of a chord than I was" (114). He is smart and imbues every word with meaning so the prose exudes literary wit. This fast-paced novel is told from the second person perspective. He is talking to you. He is confronting all of you who were reading this book at the time and he is saying that this main character is you and if you don't like it you are going to have to change it. "You" is unnamed because he is everyone. He is every middle class twenty-something walking the streets of

New York City wondering what they want to do with their life and if everything they've done up to this point is meaningless. Well, let's be honest, it probably is, but there's a learning curve. Throughout the narrator's self-absorbed babble there is a greater meaning that he doesn't verbalize until the end of the book: that you are young, and it is not too late. The novel starts out with the famous words, "You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of morning" (1). At this point in the book, we believe him. We don't know him yet and it could just be a mistake, a wild journey of a night that doesn't happen very often. But then we read on and we realize he is lying through his teeth.

Before going forward I think it is necessary to define the term Yuppie. *The Yuppie Handbook* defines it as:

(hot new name for Young Urban Professional): A person of either sex who meets the following criteria: (1) resides in or near one of the major cities; (2) claims to be between the ages of 25 and 45; (3) lives on aspirations of glory, prestige, recognition, fame, social status, power, money, or any and all combinations of the above; (4) anyone who brunches on the weekends or works out after work (12).

I'm sure many people are familiar with this type of person and have faced a similar beast at one point or another in their lives. Maybe the yuppie is toned down now and not referred to in the same way but it exists. Also many people brunch and everyone exercises so those concepts, which were once new and typified by a certain group, are now more universal. But I think the major way someone is a Yuppie is their desire to be part of the elite in every single way.

"You" was in no way a Yuppie; he just seemed like one on the surface. His desires stemmed from a longing for happiness. The only times he refers to money are in passing and are always for necessities such as food or cab fare. It is never more than a fleeting thought for him; it's just a way to get through life. Money doesn't concern him because his desires are deeper than material. He truly is just sensitive

and innocent. He has a child's desires: to be a famous writer and to love someone so much that it saves him. So he doesn't as much appeal to the Yuppie as to those on the outskirts, those who are accused of being Yuppies when they actually are not. Maybe they dress well and make a good living but they don't have the same mentality. There are plenty of people who fit this description not just for the Yuppie group, but also for any type of social stigma. What the novel is doing is commenting on the instability of surfaces at showing a person's depth. What a person seems to be does not necessarily show who they are, and when it comes down to it even if someone seems to fit the criteria of a negative social group, that doesn't mean their true desires aren't founded in something as simple as love. And love, much like the act of writing, is timeless, which is the essence of *Bright Lights, Big City*.

In contrast, his friend Tad Allagash fits the criteria of a Yuppie perfectly. He is purely a partying friend for "You" and together they foray into the underworld. When describing Tad, "You" says, "Tad is the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. He is either your best self or your worst self, you're not sure which . . . You are awed by his strict refusal to acknowledge any goal higher than the pursuit of pleasure. You want to be like that. You also think he is shallow and dangerous" (2-3). Unlike "You" Tad has the mentality. He is selfish, shallow, and puts more effort into his appearance than his relationships. He is the perfect partner for "You" at this point in his life because he can go out with Tad without talking about his problems: Tad doesn't care about them and will never ask. He is the fun friend, the one you never spend time with sober. His friendship with Tad goes as deep as the surface, which is also as far as he's willing to go without admitting his failures, and his insecurities. Tad is his best self because he brings him out into society and is his partner in navigating what was considered to be the trendiest places with the trendiest people. He is his worst self because he distracts him from the life he truly wants to lead with a wife and a writing career. He helps him with his exterior persona and makes him look good but this has an indirect

relationship with his interior, and with each superficial interaction he falls deeper into a pit of misery.

Throughout the book “You” surrounds himself with the New York elite. To be part of this elite one needed to have a job that impressed other people. “You” works in the *Department of Factual Verification* for an unnamed prestigious magazine, which is implied to be *The New Yorker*. His job consists of making sure everything is true to avoid tarnishing the reputation of the magazine, which is another reference to the importance of appearances and the distinction between truth and lies. With regard to his job he says, “You find it touching, almost heartbreaking, this ethic of appearances” (81). He started his position there with the hope of moving up and becoming a writer in the fiction department. Instead of spending his days making sure facts were accurate and true, he longed to write stories that were rooted in imagination and provided an escape for himself and his readers. He came into the job with ambition and motivation but after years of having his writing politely rejected and staying in the job position he initially viewed as a stepping stone, he loses the faith that he will ever succeed. The bright side of his situation is that he is still associated with a magazine that evokes awe in the eyes of others. He is still able to wow perfect strangers with his place of employment by subtly glossing over the mundane intricacies of his job.

“You” wasn’t alone in trying desperately to hold on to a job title that seemed worthy of esteem. The financial moguls of the time were resorting to criminal means in order to maintain their lifestyles and keep their companies afloat. In *Revisiting the Eighties* by Gilbert T. Sewall, Sewall points out

It looked as though Trump might go bankrupt. Boesky went to jail for insider trading, as did Kidder Peabody’s former superstar, Martin Siegel; after a massive Securities and Exchange Commission investigation, so did Drexel Burnham Lambert’s engineer of junk-bond-castles-in-the-air, Michael Milken. In 1990, Drexel, the most

feared pirate company of the eighties, went out of business. Debt – government, corporate, and consumer – greased the free-for-all.
(Sewall, XVI)

Debt exemplifies the lying of the period; people lived for their present needs as opposed to their future. Although “You” does not go to criminal means in order to keep his job, he is not dissimilar to those who created intricate lies in order to keep up with appearances. Insider trading is in the same vein as lying. These financiers were privy to illegal information which could lead to financial success so they lied to everyone who could be hurt in the process and who would want to expose such financial corruption.

What is apparent at the time is the blatant narcissism that plagued the minds of everyone in the eighties. The motto for the eighties was *carpe diem* and this “seize the day” attitude displays itself in *Bright Lights, Big City*. “You” is spontaneous and enjoys a rebellious lifestyle that includes ever-changing scenery, people, and mind-altering substances. His sole concern is his search for happiness and he tries to lose himself in destructive behavior in order to create the temporary joy that comes from cocaine, alcohol, casual sex, and superficial friendships. He is trapped in this cycle, “The music pumps you up, makes you want to do something, not necessarily dance. The drugs make you feel the music and music makes you want to do more drugs” (49). Acknowledging his true feelings and his true desires in the harsh light of sobriety would cause him to come to the miserable realization that he is not living the life that he always dreamed of. “You” is not a narcissist: he chooses to be one to avoid acknowledging his problems. Since narcissism was so common during the eighties he was able to fit in seamlessly.

In *The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals* by Irving Kristol, the author sums up this rampant self-absorption, “though only a few are capable of pursuing excellence, everyone is capable of recognizing and pursuing his own self-interest” (13). People were not working toward a greater good for the world but rather a greater good for

themselves because that is always much simpler. Like “You”, the intellectuals of the eighties preferred to take the easy way out and use their abilities to fulfill their own desires and needs. There was a lack of interest in posterity and instead a focus on the here and now. No one wanted to think about how and if they were affecting the future because all of their focus was on living in the moment and trying to be as socially and mentally satisfied as possible.

We can still see this attitude today. There is a creeping feeling in the back of everyone’s minds that what we are doing today could end up ruining the world. Putting *Bright Lights, Big City* back in the spotlight might help shed some light on our self-absorption and make people realize that they need to be better in every way. McInerney alludes to the moral degradation during the eighties in a specific unsettling scene at the beginning of the book. “You” is on the subway headed to work when one of the many homeless people in New York City approaches him. He jadedly ignores their plea for help. The homeless man then walks over to an old woman on the train and sits on her, and what commences is symbolic of the complete self-absorption of the majority of New York City.

Almost everyone in the car is watching and pretending they’re not.
The man folds his arms across his chest and leans farther back.
“Sir, Please get off of me.”

You can’t even believe it. Half a dozen healthy men are within spitting distance. You would have jumped up yourself but you assumed someone closer to the action would act. The woman is quietly sobbing. As each moment passes it becomes harder and harder to do anything without calling attention to the fact that you hadn’t done anything earlier. (12-13)

What is apparent in this passage is the lack of care for other human beings. Everyone in the scene has displaced the responsibility of helping the old woman onto someone else. The shame is spread so thin over everyone that the guilt barely penetrates the

surface of each individual. All it would have taken was the courage for one person to stand up and the rest would have followed. This ties into my previous quote regarding pursuing excellence and pursuing self-interest. These men took the easy way out and stayed in their seats rather than taking the energy to stand. They didn't care enough to do it first and hoped that someone else would. This scene ends without further contemplation from the narrator. One can assume that the others who witnessed the scene went on with their days without another thought about it. When reading this scene can one honestly say that this exemplifies the eighties? No. Of we read this without having any background information, we can easily assume that it took place yesterday.

Throughout the book, "You" finds ways to distract himself from his obvious sadness. In addition to drugs and sex he finds pleasure in reading *The New York Post*. For those who are not from New York and may not know about what it means to read the *Post*, I will say that there is a definite social stigma attached to it. In one corner stands the *New York Times*, which is a sign of intellectuality, liberalism, and real journalism and is known as superior reading. While in comparison people consider *The Post* to be trash. It is a sensationalist newspaper with ludicrous headlines that reports on the filth, the morbid, and the rich and famous. "You" says, "The *Post* is the most shameful of your several addictions. You hate to support this kind of trash with your thirty cents, but you are a secret fan of Killer Bees, Hero Cops, Sex Fiends, Lottery Winners, Teenage Terrorists, Liz Taylor, Tough Tots, Sicko Creeps, Living Nightmares, Life on Other Planets, Spontaneous Human Combustion, Miracle Diets and Coma Babies" (11).

His obsession with the extravagant, exceptional, and gruesome ties into his desire to hide in lies. "You" does not like to acknowledge the problems in his own life so why would he want to acknowledge them in the rest of the world? He is focused on the immediate, the here and now, and the problems that have solutions, not the ones that are complex. Twenty-five years later, *The Post* is still in existence.

With its long list of controversies over falsifications and eventual retractions one would assume that the reading public might cease to continue purchasing this newspaper. Apparently that is not the case since according to thepaperboy.com, it is the fourteenth most circulated newspaper in the country.

In the Yuppie area of New York City there was very little thought towards the greater problems of the world. This was the Upper East Side, the *nouveau riche*. These were the trendy intellectuals who made money quickly and spent it frivolously. It was the era that celebrated excess (Taylor) and elitism. These were the people with whom “You” surrounded himself. He rubbed shoulders with models, actors, and investment bankers. Susan Gutfreund, the wife of the famous and powerful trader of the eighties John Gutfreund, summed it up best, “It’s so expensive to be rich!” (166). This mantra may speak for Yuppies, but it most definitely did not speak for “You”. “You” never quite felt right around these people. He roamed among them as if he belonged but his constant mutterings about not being “the kind of guy...” usually happened when he was around them. “You” says, “You succeeded in faking everyone out, and never quite lost the fear that you would eventually be discovered a fraud, an imposter in the social circle. Which is just about how you feel these days” (47). The upper echelon of society wasn’t where he belonged but he faked it as best he could. Susan Gutfreund’s statement doesn’t just speak of the eighties but rather the upper class in general, and could most definitely still be the mantra of the Upper East Side today. Sending your children to the best private school, spending the summer in the Hamptons, and doing cocaine are still high society requirements and there are those who aren’t able to check those things off their list, so they sharpen their masquerading skills and quietly deceive this group that they so desperately want to be a part of.

“You” isn’t the only character in the novel that is internally miserable and externally self-destructive. His boss at the *Department of Factual Verification*, Clara Tillinghast, otherwise known as “The Clinger”, displays her sadness by being harsh

and unfriendly. “You” says of Clara, “Sometimes you have wanted to tell her: *Hey, I know what it’s like*. You have seen her at that little piano bar off Columbus, clutching her drink and waiting for somebody to come up and say hello. When she’s bitching you out, you have wanted to say: *Why don’t you just admit you hurt?* But by the time you understood this it was too late. She wanted your hide” (21). “You” paints a sad picture of a lonely woman. He empathizes with her because he understands loneliness. What is interesting about Clara’s character is that she feels the common feeling of longing. She is clearly successful. We do not know enough about her hopes and dreams but one can assume that it is not her job that depresses her. It is hard to find success in all categories of your life: love, work, and health. There is usually one that is not up to par. For Clara it is her love life. This is something that every emotional and empathetic person can relate to because no matter whom you are or what you do, if you are able to feel any sort of love then you long for someone to love with your entire being. Whether it’s 1984 or 2010, being powerful in your job and alone in your personal life is something that many people deal with.

“You” always dreamed of being a great writer. He cites the classics and wants to live a life of literary success. He wants to be a legend. The problem is that his misery becomes too distracting. The bright hope he once had has diminished. In the eighties, partly due to Reaganism, there was this feeling that success was so close you could almost touch it. Trickle down caused everyone to believe that the wealth was being distributed and everyone was getting a small share. Those with a good education felt that being part of the financial and intellectual elite was something they could achieve. New York City was a place of dreams and accomplishments. McInerney writes of New York during the time period: “They imagine that they’ll go to the ‘perfect place – wherever that is – and meet the ideal people and the ideal mate, and that their life will look like a *New Yorker* ad in the morning. What’s invalid about this is that people thought these were reasonable expectations, or even a good set of expectations, in the first place” (110). “You” does this continuously; he hopes

that somehow, in the darkest of bars at the earliest of hours, he'll meet the perfect woman. He feels the hope that seems to be contagious in New York and even at his most pessimistic times he is still able to imagine that it will somehow lead him to his desired life. There is still that feeling about being in New York, or any great city for that matter. The belief is that you will get to this great place, be it New York, Los Angeles, or Paris, and great things will happen. There is so much commotion, creativity, and intelligence going on in these places that one hopes just being there gives them the head start they need. Unfortunately success doesn't happen by osmosis.

What "You" does to deal with his failure of becoming a great writer is he stops putting in any effort. He tries to find other things to distract himself from the actual activity of writing. He can then delude himself with the idea that he is capable of writing a great work of literature and he just hasn't had the time yet. "You" says, "You wanted to skip over the dull grind of actual creation. After a hard day of work on other people's manuscripts – knowing in your heart that you could do better – the last thing you wanted to do was to go home and write. You wanted to go out . . . Of course, mentally, you were always taking notes. Saving it all up. Waiting for the day when you would sit down and write your masterpiece" (41). "You" truly believes he is capable of a masterpiece. Young people truly believe their dreams will come true. The problem is when you say it out loud, when you admit what you want and what you believe you can do, all anyone has to say to you is "prove it", and whether or not you can is the ultimate test. "You" has been told that he is a good writer, and the continual affirmation of this belief throughout high school and college has raised his expectations. His chances of writing the next classic novel are extremely thin. But what drives him forward is his faith in his intelligence and capabilities. There is a danger in being too confident because it can lead to expectations that are never met. Positive reinforcement can be taken too far and the youth of today is experiencing that. The amount of young unemployed people is on the rise and our worst

nightmares could be around the corner. This could be that we spent the majority of our lives working incredibly hard and learning so much but in the end there is nothing to show for it. The lesson of *Bright Lights, Big City* is that we shouldn't set our sights on only the highest of goals but also not fall to the lowest ranks of society when things don't work out. McInerney's "You" is emblematic of how failed dreams can lead to something better and this is a story, which the high achievers of society should read as a cautionary tale.

It isn't until the chapter "Les Jeux Sont Faits" ("The Games Are Made") on page sixty-nine that the reader finally hears the truth about Amanda, the ex-wife of "You". The pages before that are filled with subtle insults toward her and one can only insinuate that she really hurt him. The truth comes out in the story of their first meeting and how their relationship progressed. She was a country girl, so his college education and his parents from Connecticut awed her. She used him as access to New York City and a life of fame, the life everyone wanted at the time. She became a model and eventually left him with little explanation, leaving our narrator distraught which probably was the catalyst of his more deviant behavior.

We get the sense that he wanted their relationship to work but didn't have absolute faith in it because he knew he wasn't feeling true love. He says, "You did not feel that you could open quite all of your depths to her, or fathom hers, and sometimes you feared she didn't have any depths. But you finally attributed this to an unrealistic, youthful idealism. Growing up meant admitting you couldn't have everything" (73). This seems to be his mantra at this point in his life, although he has a lot of trouble accepting it. His relationship with Amanda wasn't real, like most of his relationships at the time. They wanted things from each other: he would give her the Yuppie life she dreamed of while in the trailer park as a child and she would give him love, which is what he always wanted. But wanting love is not the same as experiencing it. His sensitivity is his greatest weakness and strength. He feels everything so deeply and he wanted the true and utter happiness that comes from

love, because he of all people was capable of feeling it to his core, and he wanted it to penetrate his sadness and make it go away. To the outsider, a shallow super model is clearly not the right match for him. Yet he preferred to go along with their seemingly great relationship in hopes that the inside would eventually match the outside. Until then they were the writer and the model, and at least it looked like it was great.

It is not until this point that the reader finds out that “You” has been lying to everyone about Amanda leaving him. His co-workers, acquaintances, and family do not know. Along with his plateauing career, his relationship did not go anywhere either. He still doesn’t want to admit that Amanda wasn’t right for him. He deludes himself with the hope that she will return even though six months have already gone by. When “You” refers to not telling his father about Amanda he says, “He would never be able to forgive Amanda. As long as there is a chance she might still return, you don’t want him to know about her treachery. You want to tough it out on your own” (77). Any reader who has had any failing or failed relationship can understand what he’s going through. Admitting it’s over, saying the words out loud, has finality to it. If we don’t say it then it isn’t real.

This denial furthers the idea that we can still read the book today and relate to it. It touches on the more embarrassing of human emotions, the emotions that we think we are too old for but we still experience anyway. This novel is far from the critic’s descriptions as superficial because it delves into the depths of a character, it goes into his internal monologue, and the reader is able to go through his constant fluctuation of emotions. McInerney isn’t presenting the outside of a person, but rather their insides, which are uncensored, unadulterated, and not always the nicest. That’s deeper than most writers are willing to go and most readers are willing to read. On occasion “You” is childlike but in a way he isn’t because McInerney is showing that we never really grow up as much as we think we do. The novel isn’t promoting denial as a healthy means of living – we should try to grow up and admit our

mistakes – but he is saying that it's normal. The term “act your age” starts to lose its meaning when you think about things that way.

Then there is the character Vicky Hollins who is Amanda's polar opposite. She is Tad's cousin and “You” agrees to go on a blind date with her at the last minute. She is the first sign of hope in the novel, the light at the end of the tunnel. In every way that Amanda was wrong for “You”, Vicky seems right. She brings out a side of the narrator that we have not seen yet. He says, “Eventually you ascend the stairs to the street. You think of Plato's pilgrims climbing out of the cave, from the shadow world of appearances toward things as they really are, and you wonder if it is possible to change in this life” (93). According to *Encyclopedia Britannica* Plato's allegory of the cave is,

Plato likened the ordinary person to a man sitting in a cave looking at a wall on which he sees nothing but the shadows of real things behind his back, and he likened the philosopher to a man who has gotten out into the open and seen the real world of the Forms. Coming back, he may be less able to distinguish the shades because he has been blinded by the light outside; but he is the only one who knows reality, and he conducts his life accordingly.

He sees Vicky as an escape from the world of Yuppies, drugs, and the dregs of New York City nightlife. They leave the bar and walk up the stairs, up from the hell they are in, the darkness, and towards life and people. Like in Plato's allegory, the bar is a place of appearances and it is not until “You” ascends the stairs and goes outside is he able to see reality and depth. He doesn't stay with her in a place that is too dark to see the other person or too loud to hear what they are saying; instead, for the first time, he goes somewhere with another person that isn't part of the underworld. He is able to leave superficiality with her and take off his armor and just be a real person. They have a seemingly perfect first date and for the first time in the novel “You” admits that he is happy. The narrator's only long interaction with Vicky is in one

chapter. It seems to spark something in him though and the rest of the book is filled with various moments of destruction, closure, and eventual rehabilitation. In the next chapter he is fired from his job for not perfectly fact checking an article. This, combined with his happiness from his date with Vicky, sets off a chain of events that lead to his rising from the darkness. You have to hit rock bottom in order to work back up and that is exactly what he does. He makes such a mess out of everything that the only thing left to do is start cleaning.

The key to understanding the narrator's motivations is not Amanda, Vicky, or his career but is in fact the death of his mother, something we do not find out about until three quarters of the way through the novel. We are introduced to his brother Michael, who has been trying to get in touch with him throughout the book. "You" is so scared of facing reality that he literally runs away when he sees Michael. The direction he runs toward is a night of drug abuse and casual sex just to avoid an honest conversation. What it takes for "You" to finally start being honest with himself is Michael punching him in the face. It's as if the blow to his head set his thoughts straight and obliterated all the lies he was planning on telling. He comes to and starts confessing. It is cathartic. He makes his two confessions simultaneously,

"Amanda isn't shopping," you say. "She left me."

"What?"

"She called up from France one day and said she wasn't coming home." . . .

"Are you alright?"

"I miss Mom," you say." (159)

It's not easy to lie to the ones you care about. "You" avoids his family because he knows he will have to tell them the truth. He spent the past couple of months with people who didn't care enough about him to ask if he was okay.

"You" gives a detailed description of his last encounter with his mother. It seems as if it was the last time he was able to be honest. It also seems like many of

his less respectable endeavors stemmed from this last conversation. She talks about the doctors giving her cocaine to help deal with her cancer and about her curiosity about casual sex. It's as if "You" took these things to be okay since she brought them up and so he then made them part of his lifestyle. He opens up to her and tells her his insecurities, "You tried to tell her, as well as you could, what it was like being you. You described the feeling you'd always had of being misplaced, of always standing to one side of yourself, of watching yourself in the world even as you were being in the world, and wondering if this was how everyone felt. That you always believed that other people had a clearer idea of what they were doing, and didn't worry quite so much about why" (167). His mother never responds to his confession. It is hard to tell whether it is intentional or not. Either way, "You" never really finds out if he is alone in feeling the way he does. It remains an unresolved issue and he is left to wonder if he disappointed her in his admission, which may have closed him off to admissions of any kind in the future.

In the last chapter of the novel "You" is high, not just on cocaine but on honesty and on coming to terms with who he is. He doesn't hold back at laughing in Amanda's face when she asks him "How's it going?" and he calls up Vicky to tell her his mother died because he wants to be truthful with her from the start. He is on a spree and even when he comes down from the drugs he still wants to continue on this path. In the sober morning he comes across a bakery truck filled with fresh bread and he realizes he hasn't eaten in two days. He trades his Ray Bans for some bread and the last thing he says is, "You get down on your knees and tear open the bag. The smell of warm dough envelops you. The first bite sticks in your throat and you almost gag. You will have to go slowly. You will have to learn everything all over again" (182). "You" is done with avoiding his problems. Instead of seeing himself as "not the kind of guy" or "the kind of guy" he will just be, without trying to fulfill some goal or avoid some defeat.

The end of *Bright Lights, Big City* does not give any clear resolutions but it does give a sense of hope. It is like life in that way; there is no nice bow tied around the problems of the characters, it just shows “You” pointing himself in a new and healthier direction. It is open ended for the reader. We can hope that it all works out well for him but we just don’t know. He could easily fall off the wagon, his relationship with Vicky could dissolve, and he could end up in rehab but that is the pessimistic interpretation. The inflated optimism of the generation in the book and the current generation is not healthy, but the novel shows that a moderate amount of optimism is necessary to get through the hard times and move on. So we end the novel with this moderate optimism, not expecting “You” to be the next Salinger, but rather hope that he finds the love that he so desperately wants and needs. And that is not too much to expect for him, or for anyone.

We can look to the time before the stock market crash in 1987 as a similar time to before the stock market crash in 2008. The critiques made in *Bright Lights, Big City* still ring true, especially for those of us in the New York City area. Seeing the relationship between the not so different New York City generations, it is easy to understand why *Bright Lights, Big City* is currently being made into a movie by the über-hip screenwriter Josh Schwartz. He plans on setting the movie in 2007 as opposed to the eighties. When asked to comment on this, McInerney said, “Sometimes it frustrates me that people think it’s a book about the eighties. Nobody used the term ‘the eighties’ back in 1983 when I wrote the damn thing I mean, it’s just a book about a guy coming to New York and getting his heart broken and losing his job. It’s universal stuff. I didn’t write it to self-destruct in 1989” (Vilensky). At the time of its heyday it was thought to be too hip to last, yet twenty-five years later, people are still reading and talking about this book. This is contrary to what most critics like Richard Sisk believed who said, “if indeed with the passage of time McInerney ever merits that much study” (99). *Bright Lights, Big City* has a magnetic quality. The critics were wrong, this novel does deserve attention.

We can only hope that the movie does the novel justice. The 1988 movie version of *Bright Lights, Big City* was a flop. The movie must stay true to “You” and not lose the gritty, self-deprecating, darkly romantic world that McInerney verbalized for us so eloquently. The novel is not about the cocaine and the nightclubs; it is about honest human emotion – which has the ability to transcend fads and decades. This movie has the potential to reinvigorate *Bright Lights, Big City* and McInerney by shedding light on its literary worth.

In the beginning of the novel, while “You” is still out at a club he says, “You know for a fact that if you go out into the morning alone, without even your sunglasses – which you have neglected to bring, because who, after all, plans on these travesties? – the harsh, angling light will turn you to flesh and bone” (6). Flesh and bone is the raw human emotion he wishes to avoid and the sunglasses are symbolic of the appearances that protect him from honesty. At the end of the novel he gets rid of his sunglasses, ready to face his darkness. So let us all take a cue from “You”. Let’s discard our sunglasses and face reality, because they are only temporary protection. The people of today don’t want to be like our eighties counterparts. We want to grow and change. So why don’t we take the message from *Bright Lights, Big City* to heart and walk out into the harsh light, shed our armor of denial, and embrace what we all essentially are, flesh and bone.

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