

**American Adolescence**

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 Office Hours: Tuesdays 1:30-3pm & by appointment

Fall 2015  
 Tuesdays 9-11:50am  
 Humanities A60

What does it mean to “come of age”? How do different Americans imagine the transition from childhood to adulthood? How have cultural notions of this collective phenomenon and individual project changed over the past century? Is there merit to the claim made by recent cultural critics that this developmental stage keeps getting longer?

This seminar will think through these questions as they are posed by and deliberated in a range of American cultural forms—mostly 20<sup>th</sup>-century novels, but also several works of non-fiction, a collection of short stories, and a recent film. Each of the novels we will read might be identified as a “bildungsroman” or “novel of formation” (or “education” or “culture,” depending on how one translates the original German term). The stories and the film we will look at might also be considered less literal members of this aesthetic category. We will pay special attention to the conventions (e.g., narrative patterns, stock characters, common tropes) of this storied form and consider the ways in which these literary conventions intersect with and complicate social expectations of the process they represent. Literary historians have argued that the bildungsroman evolves to keep pace with lived experiences of coming of age. Indeed, one critic famously declared that World War I shattered the form, as a generation of young people confronted a very different—often fatal—“end” of childhood. The novels we will read emerge after the Great War, so we will consider how this provocative claim is both accurate and misleading. In addition to these questions of literary form and historical context, we will also contemplate how different authors imagine factors like education, local and national environment, socioeconomics, biochemistry, and key components of identity—especially gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality—shape this psychosocial phenomenon.

Reading list

(In order of course reading)

Ernest Hemingway, *The Nick Adams Stories* (1920-30)  
 Frances Newman, *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* (1926)  
 Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (1928)  
 J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)  
 Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1963)  
 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970)  
 Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (1985)  
 Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* (2006)

Assignments and grading

Classwork (includes presentation) 25%  
 Paper One (4-6 pages) 25%  
 Paper Two (6-8 pages) 30%  
 Participation 20%

## Classwork

We will do small, weekly writing assignments as building blocks towards each of the two papers. We will work with these assignments in class on their due date, so they must exist, in hard copy, at the start of each class period.

Students will also be responsible for a short (5-7 minute) oral presentation on a single novel. These presentations will initiate class discussion that day and thus should focus on raising questions rather than providing answers about the given work. I will deliver an example presentation at our second meeting.

## Papers

Both papers will be analytical essays about at least one course novel. Topics are flexible (translation: if you have an exciting idea/question/hunch/puzzle, just ask!). Papers should include a well-formulated, argumentative, focused thesis and ample, pertinent textual support. They must also be typed, double-spaced, MLA-formatted with a proper heading, margins, and Works Cited.

The second paper should briefly consider the novel's original context and cite at least one work of contemporaneous non-fiction that speaks, in some way, to the essay's overarching claims. To that end, we will dedicate an early class session to a library orientation to archival research. I will be happy to discuss additional tips for archival research throughout the quarter.

## Additional requirements

The success of our seminar depends upon the active participation of every student. Participation constitutes a large portion (20%) of the final grade for the course. I will calculate it as follows: I will not keep track of the number of times you raise your hand; I will attend to the evidence that you actively, regularly engage with the material, share your insights and questions with the class, and incorporate these thoughts as well as my feedback into the course assignments.

## Weekly schedule

\* The week's assigned novel should be completed prior to our meeting.

### What is Adolescence?

- Tuesday September 29: the bildungsroman and early notions of adolescence
- Supplements: Excerpts from G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence* (1904) & Phyllis Blanchard, *The Adolescent Girl: A Psychoanalytic Viewpoint* (1920)

### Adolescence Emerges

- Tuesday October 6 (Week 2): Ernest Hemingway, *The Nick Adams Stories* (1920-30)
- Tuesday October 13 (Week 3): Frances Newman, *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* (1926)
- Tuesday October 20 (Week 4): Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (1928)

### "Adolescence Speaking for Itself"

- Tuesday October 27 (Week 5): J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)
  - Supplement: Nash K. Burger, "Adolescence Speaking for Itself" *The New York Times Book Review* (1951)
- Tuesday November 3 (Week 6): Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1963)

### Adolescence Evolves

- Tuesday November 10 (Week 7): Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970)
- Tuesday November 17 (Week 8): Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (1985)

### Adolescence Today

\*\* No class Tuesday November 24

- Tuesday December 1 (Week 10): Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* (2006)
- TBD (Week 11): *Inside Out* (2015)
  - Supplements: “Do We Need to Redefine Adulthood?” various authors, *The New York Times* online “Room for Debate” (2012); Laurence Steinberg, “The Case For Delayed Adulthood” *The New York Times* (2014)

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