

Narrative Time, Age Studies, and Discourses of Identity in Postwar American Literature

Denis Jonnes

Theorists of narrative have often been at odds over what aspects of language or subject matter go into the making of a ‘story’ but are generally agreed that narrative, whether in novel, short story, or other story-telling forms (drama or film), presupposes a subject experiencing events ‘in,’ ‘through,’ or ‘over’ time. Making the point that “virtually all stories are about human beings” or “humanoid creatures,” Robert Scholes states that “only one kind of thing can be narrated: a time thing, or to use our normal world for it, an ‘event’” (209). Gerald Prince speaks of the “ordering of events in time ... as one of the most fundamental characteristics of any story” (23). Seymour Chatman writes that “narrative subsists in an event chain, operating through time, the logic of which is xRy, where R is temporal succession.” (806). Paul Ricoeur refers to the sequence of events in a fictional narrative as representing the “the temporal character” of “human experience” (52).

But how human subjects (or narrators/characters) ‘experience’ the temporal dimension of events—or how, in some more fundamental sense, human subjects experience time itself—are issues theorists of various stripes have addressed without coming to any definitive formulation. If at some common-sense level we ‘experience’ time in terms of duration as measured by clock (seconds, minutes, hours) or calendar (days, weeks, months, years), cultural historians have noted that the advent

of modern ‘clock time’ only occurred in European societies in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The modern experience of chronological time, and the organization of individual and social life around hourly/daily schedules and weekly/monthly calendar, has been contrasted with both ‘eschatological time’ (and the afterlife of the human soul in ‘eternity’) and pre-modern ‘cyclical’ notions of time marked by natural events (sunrise, sunset, the turn of the seasons).¹ Abraham Moles, in suggesting the nature of an event itself determines how we record the ‘passage of time,’ has argued for a typology of events predicated on their scope and degree of impact on the subject. Thus Moles distinguishes among (1) micro-events, “which pass through the consciousness but are then effaced from memory;” (2) mini-events, “which are retained for a variable but always limited time span: one day, one month, one year;” (3) “events” in the ‘proper’ sense, “remembered by those who have actually participated in the events or were witnesses;” and (4) ‘the great events’ (such as wars, natural disasters, epidemics, etc.) “which are inscribed in social archives” (90-96).

Moles’ typology suggests some of the complexity inherent in efforts to frame ‘experience’ in terms of clock or calendar time or, for that matter, in terms of wider notions of ‘historical’ time. Questions of how time—the experience of an ‘instant’ or of events transpiring over longer periods—comes to be represented in narrative form was central to the modernist critique of assumptions about temporality underpinning nineteenth-century realist fiction. Observing that “narrative realism presents time as simple given,” Ronald Schleifer has suggested that for a nineteenth-century novelist like George Eliot ‘time’ or how to represent time was not an issue per se. In Schleifer’s account, Eliot “presented time unselfconsciously and unproblematically” (70-71); the passage of time is “continuous” and “the subject of temporal experience is simple and unitary” (73). Describing how modernists

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reacted against “the regular continuity of clock time” (as, for example, can be “observed in the naturalist novel”), Georges Poulet argues that central to the Modernist project was “re-establishing a new, authentic contact with ‘time’” (7). In questioning whether ‘events’ could be narrated in ways that convincingly mimicked the passage of clock/calendar time, modernists emphasized the subjective experience of the temporal. A narrator’s or character’s experience of events in time could be altered by subsequent events, or the meaning of an event might be reinterpreted with the introduction of new, differing points of view. Referring to “the diminished importance of temporal succession as a medium of narrative meaning,” Ursula Heise notes that the rise of what she calls the modernist ‘time novel’ sought to “provide a record of individual temporal experience” and expressed “resistance to the increasing standardization and mechanization of time” (51).

In placing emphasis on the subjective experience of time, modernist narrative laid increasing stress on the importance of memory and the ways we come to recollect and order past events but, equally, on developing techniques such as ‘stream of consciousness’ to convey the immediacy of events, a subject’s implication in events as they were actually occurring. As Gerard Genette and others have shown, modernist narrative came to be characterized by ‘anachronies,’ the interruption of sequences—in the form of interpolated flashback or flash forward—as well as the use of multiple points of view. Breaking up the story-line, modernists brought into question the correlation of a subject’s experience with a single ‘homogeneous’ flow or stream of time. As Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Proust’s *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* attest, the subjectivizing and resultant fragmenting of event-sequences produced maze-like narratives where a principal interpretive task became one of reconstructing what actually ‘happens,’ the precise succession of events in time. But it is also necessary to stress, as critics have noted in drawing

on trauma theory in the analysis of twentieth-century texts, how a character/narrator may also become fixated on one particular ‘high impact’ event—a personally or historically experienced event—occurring at a particular moment in time which then shapes the whole of a subsequent life course.²

If modernist narrative sought to represent a heightened awareness of time—whatever form that awareness took—it nonetheless gave surprisingly scant attention to a dimension of the temporal which played a growing role in modern industrialized societies regulated by clock and calendar time—namely, chronological or birth age.³ The social positioning of individuals on the basis of age became widespread in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century with the rise of mandatory schooling and education systems where admission and grade level were determined by month and year of birth, with implementation of workplace rules where wages and advancement became a function of ‘seniority’, and the introduction across a broad array of vocations of a mandatory ‘retirement age.’ The subjection of individuals and groups to clock- and calendar-regulated regimes meant that individuals came to be perceived and evaluated on the basis of age, years of education or years of experience on the job. In this sense, a whole host of characteristics involving skills, forms of knowledge, and work/career which required a specified period of education and training, became a function of one’s age and determined one’s relations to those older or younger, as well, for instance, when one was in a position to marry, whether one could purchase a home, and thus ultimately one’s place within the community.

With the recent rise of ‘age studies,’ cultural theorists have attempted to address some of these issues, especially what Robin Morgan Gullette and Kathleen Woodward perceive as deeply entrenched biases against the middle-aged or elderly, and the prevalence of what Gullette calls the “decline narrative.” The criticisms

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leveled by Gullette, Woodward and others have been in part borne out by the fact that ‘age studies’ has itself remained largely peripheral to the various cultural studies projects which have shaped literary studies and narrative theory from the nineteen-seventies onward.⁴ Referring to the ways in which ‘identity’ is determined by a subject’s relation to “the cultural system organized around age” (202), Gullette has contended that ‘middle age’ status should be considered with race, class, and gender, as conjoined discriminations” (225). Asserting that “age theory deserves to join feminist, African-American, queer, postcolonial, and cultural theory both as a powerful tool of cultural and historical analysis and as a liberatory discourse,” Gullette notes that “unlearning the master narrative of aging—the ‘decline’ narrative—may in some ways be like extirpating racist and sexist narratives” (219). She observes that “the respect, sensitivity, skills, and urgency that go into analyzing gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, nation, or geographic place (and sometimes politics, handicap, and religion), have not been transferred to age” (201), and she laments the fact that age theory “lacks a concept like ‘gender’ or ‘race’ to identify the system that keeps a regime of age knowledge circulating . . . We have no word like ‘patriarchy’ that permits us to conceive of age as another field of power and hierarchy, politics and narrative, demystification and resistance” (212).

While Gullette’s call for greater alertness to “the assumptions of contemporary age ideology” (202), and how perceptions of age and age-ism have shaped narrative and the representation of those at various stages of the life course—in particular how they work to the disadvantage of those in ‘midlife’ and beyond—there is something disingenuous to the claim that ‘age’ has remained an essentially occluded dimension of human experience within contemporary cultural and narrative theory. In part, it overlooks a principal impetus behind the rise of the cultural studies movement

in the nineteen-seventies: the largely youth-based dissident movements of the sixties, whose adherents and supporters would embrace the ‘identity politics’ advocated and practiced by feminists, ethnic-, gender-, queer- and postcolonial-studies specialists, and who have been at the forefront of the ‘age studies’ and anti-age-ist movement. The charge leveled by dissident youth in the sixties—and subsequently by feminists in their critique of ‘patriarchy’ (a term with the double implication of both gender and age status)—was precisely the reverse of that made by Gullette: namely, that power in public and private spheres rested with ‘adults’—principally, middle-aged and older males—who exercised authority in ways that worked to the disadvantage of youth, and in ways perceived as inimical to ideals—freedom, equality, democracy ‘established’ authority represented itself as defending in the postwar era.

The appeal for greater recognition of ‘age’ as factor shaping ‘identity’—and how ‘identity’ came to be ascribed on the basis of birth age—can seem even odder given that the term, as introduced into academic discourse in the United States and popularized by Erik Erikson in the early nineteen-fifties, was first formulated in an age-specific context. For Erikson, the concept of ‘identity’—in particular, as used in his discussion of the ‘identity crisis’—took on meaning within a highly restricted context, one which perceived position within the ‘life course’ as the most critical determinant of one’s social position. In Erikson’s account, the adolescent ‘identity crisis’ entailed a moment of ‘confrontation’—with society, with oneself—which youth inevitably experienced in the course of negotiating the transition from adolescence to adulthood, a moment which, given the demands of technologically-advanced postwar society, had become, in Erikson’s view, fraught with difficulty. Having gained a victory which elevated the United States into the world’s dominant power, Americans found themselves immediately confronting new—and, for Americans, historically-unprecedented—vulnerabilities associated with

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the development of nuclear weapons and the outbreak of the Cold War. The strategic imperatives which emerged with new doctrines of deterrence required both higher levels of technological and scientific expertise, and a new degree of political commitment as policy makers sought to present a unified front against the emerging Soviet threat. As Americans geared up for the Cold War, the increased demand for education and those with scientific and technical training would mean adolescents and young adults were spending more time in school and university but also, as a result, that social life became ‘age-segregated,’ as youth were increasingly restricted to interaction with those of the same age. In recognizing the emergence of what David Riesman would call the ‘peer group’ as factor shaping the lives of adolescents, Erikson acknowledged that American youth were spending longer periods in what could seem like a limbo-like realm, insulated from the immediate social and political realities of the postwar era. While progression through the various stages of life remains central to Erik Erikson’s account of human development, the ‘boundaries’ marking off the various ‘life stages’ were ever-more precisely demarcated—with the sense of the boundaries separating ‘adulthood’ from the world of ‘adolescents’ becoming more pronounced—as schools, businesses, governments and, for instance, the military services, established qualifications (or, in the case of legal systems, prescribed punishments) on the basis of birth age.

If Erikson can in some respects be criticized for adopting perspectives conditioned by functionalist theory pervasive in the American social sciences from the mid-forties onwards (with its account of American society in terms an ever-expanding array of increasingly specialized but ever more inter-dependent vocations and tasks), he nevertheless raised a number of questions which were to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of individual growth and ‘life stage’ in postwar America. He noted, in particular, the degree to which in periods of rapid social change,

‘identity’ was subject to a process of continual re-assessment and re-negotiation, even for those occupying putative ‘adult’ roles. While Erikson writes that those who have achieved ‘adulthood’ must undertake to “guide the next generation”—a task presupposing “the dependence of children on adults”—the success of their performance could only ultimately be judged by the young receiving adult ‘guidance.’ In making youth the arbiters of adult accomplishment—Erikson speaks of “the dependence of the older generation on the younger one” and “mature man needing guidance as well as encouragement from what has been produced and must be taken care of” (266)—he suggested that adult ‘identity’ was, somewhat paradoxically, dependent on those who had not yet, from an Eriksonian perspective, actually achieved an ‘identity.’⁵

In asserting “the dependence of the older generation on the younger one,” Erikson began to point to a further aspect of age relations in postwar American culture: the extent to which the young came to embody—precisely to the degree they were relegated to the margins of adult society—an ideal of freedom as promulgated in the context of the emerging Cold War crusade against ‘totalitarian’ communism. Leerom Medovoi has suggested that postwar youth became, in various ways, “a privileged cold war trope of the American democratic character” (“Democracy,” 257). While, as Medovoi observes, “the increased autonomy of youths was often feared for its delinquent potential,” he also notes that ‘autonomous’ youth and an “emerging youth culture” were, in fact, “defended” by “cold war cultural leaders” (257). In Medovoi’s account, youth represented “the Jefferson, human-rights-focused democratic America,” (279), a view of youth that would become “a widely accepted part of the (American) Cold War agenda” (257).⁶

The attention accorded ‘youth’—both in their efforts to achieve an ‘identity’ and in personifying freedoms which had been put on hold as demands for ‘conformity’

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to social roles defined by work, family and commitment to nation intensified—helps to account for the ‘identity politics’ of the period and how this determined a familial and inter-personal dynamic which informs much of the fiction and drama of the era. The linkage of age, social location and ideology in key texts from the nineteen-forties onward not only identified characters by birth age (or by year in school or college) but often made age itself the focal issue defining relationships among characters and determining the direction and flow of the action. In a broad array of texts, age is not simply one among many aspects in the portrayal of characters, but a factor which shaped in critical ways how other characters perceive and respond to them. I would briefly mention Truman Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms* with its twelve year old protagonist in search of the father who had abandoned him; William Styron’s *Lie Down in Darkness*, in which the young heroine’s age is repeatedly referred to and her sixteenth birthday becomes a pivotal turning point in the plot; Saul Bellow’s *Seize the Day*, where the failed actor Tommy Wilhelm’s age—he is forty—contributes to the pathos of his situation. In J.D.Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, the precocious Holden Caulfield is identified as sixteen and his sister Phoebe as twelve—a text in which, ironically, the adolescent narrator/protagonist seems to act both adult-like (in his desire to protect children) and childlike in the distance he maintains between himself and society. The middle-aged couple, George, a professor of history, and his wife Martha, in Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* repeatedly refer to an imaginary twenty-year old son who, as George informs Martha in the climactic scene, has just died in an automobile accident. Flannery O’Connor makes age—and the degree to which age is associated with particular social expectations and norms—central to her description of character. In “Revelation,” Mary Grace, “eighteen or nineteen years old” and a “student at Wellesley,” sits in a doctor’s waiting room reading

a book titled *Human Development*, as she listens to her neighbor Mrs. Turpin, who “had always had good skin ... not a wrinkle on her face, though she was forty-seven years old.”⁷

I want to consider briefly three American postwar texts—Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955), Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947)—which exemplify the heightened age-consciousness of the period, and the degree to which a specified birth age is fundamental to the portrayal of character and the outcome of the action: a factor determining what characters are perceived to be capable of, the kinds of relationships they can enter into, how they respond to those older or younger, and where they stand in relation to the larger social and ideological environment of Cold War America. While we observe a more acute sense of age, age-difference, and the social distance separating younger characters from older, we also note the degree to which age-consciousness on the part of those no longer ‘young’ fuels an impulse to identify with the young or with an image of oneself as youthful. Even as age difference is accentuated, ‘youth’ itself is perceived not simply as a ‘developmental phase’ or ‘life-stage’ but as embodying values identified variously as both inimical to society (the freedom youth was seen to possess gave rise to uncertainty about what goals adolescents would set for themselves; i.e. would they ‘adjust’ to the economic, social and political realities of Cold War American society?) and as ‘existential condition’—a certain detachment from society and ‘coolness’ to its demands becoming key to emotional survival amidst the complexities of the postwar world.

Nowhere are issues of age and age difference probably more starkly on display

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than in Nabokov's *Lolita*, where the discrepancy in age between the older, adult male narrator Humbert Humbert (thirty-eight at the time he first sees Lolita) and the much younger Lolita (twelve when she first becomes the object of Humbert's gaze) is precisely what defines Humbert's behavior and, in certain respects, the novel itself as transgressive, but the course of the action also represents, if in hyperbolic form, a dynamic informing the narratives of the period more generally. If, on the one hand, the narrative seems to posit insurmountable social barriers between the older male and the younger girl—Lolita becomes Humbert's step-daughter following his marriage to her mother and his legal ward following the mother's death—it also makes clear the intensity of Humbert's desire not only for the girl but for mastery over the world she inhabits. Insofar as Lolita's world is characterized by images of Hollywood movie stars, crooners, and American pop culture, it is one which Humbert, the European writer, scholar and aesthete in exile, can never become part of. But in finding postwar America, with its suburbs and convertibles, diners and drugstores, its 'up-to-date' educational methods, unpalatable (Nabokov felt compelled in the epilogue appended to later editions to rebut charges the novel was "anti-American"), Humbert deploys all the intellectual and poetic resources at his disposal to remake that world in accord with his own image or, more precisely, the image of himself as thirteen-year old on the Riviera where he experienced his first love affair—a moment fixed in his memory following the death of his young partner. His encounter with Lolita twenty-five years later and "the impact of passionate recognition" ("It was the same child—the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair") does more than simply transport him back in time; it opens up new vistas—the possibility of reliving his life from the beginning. As Humbert describes his encounter and its impact on him, it is in immediate relation to age as measured by the passage

of a specific number of years. When he sees Lolita for the first time, these years simply disappear. He undergoes a process of what is in effect instantaneous rejuvenation: “The twenty-five years I had lived since then . . . vanished” (39).

While critics, in particular feminists, have focused on the exploitative aspects of Humbert’s behavior—a fact which Humbert himself acknowledges when he condemns himself for robbing Lolita of her childhood—what defines the relationship is the extent to which, on the basis of this radically regressive moment, Humbert can see Lolita, a young girl on the verge of adolescence, as potential partner. While much of Humbert’s account is explicit about issues of age—his own, Lolita’s, his age at the time of his first youthful affair with Annabel Lee, the ages of potential younger rivals—much of his reflection, not surprisingly, assumes the form of rationalization. The references to Dante’s Beatrice and Petrarch’s Laura, to child-marriage customs in ancient Egypt and elsewhere, while adduced as justifications by Humbert for his behavior, only accentuate the discrepancy between his age and Lolita’s and ultimately his violation of the boundary between child/adolescent and adult. But if Humbert remains keenly aware of their difference in age, he is also an observer of how the relationship changes as Lolita grows and develops into young womanhood when, ultimately having escaped Humbert’s clutches, she marries a young man her own age. If the trajectory of Humbert’s narrative is determined by the moment of all-consuming “passionate recognition” (in some respects, a Proustian moment in the apparently achieved synchrony of past and present), the particular intensity of that moment also defines the impossibility of preserving Lolita as Humbert first sees and desires her. Nothing that follows, including the erotic aspects of the relationship, really lives up to the ‘bliss’ of the initial encounter when “the twenty-five years vanished.”

While Humbert comes to experience the passing of months and years in

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relation to Lolita's 'aging' and her growing desire for independence, he becomes ever more tenacious in efforts to maintain his control over the girl. 'Successful' as he may be in these efforts, he remains glumly aware that the more adult, parent-like and 'authoritarian' his behavior—he himself rails against the 'permissiveness' of American society and the freedoms accorded teenagers—the more his actions alienate Lolita. Against the backdrop of a country and a culture that seeks to instill a sense of freedom in its youth and seems hostile to everything Humbert stands for, his perception of Lolita is increasingly mediated by the poetic fantasy he weaves around his first images of her. Transcribed in the account he writes as he awaits trial for the murder of Claire Quilty in a hospital for the criminally insane (Quilty, the only man Lolita is in fact "crazy about," is her accomplice in her plot to escape from Humbert), we are privy not only to Humbert's anxieties and guilt but come to perceive 'Lolita' as Humbert sees her: the aestheticized creation of a purely literary imagination. Ultimately, it is this aestheticizing project which defines Humbert's world and his relation to Lolita but also, in the high-culture mode of Humbert's discourse, the distance between himself and the young American girl—a figure who, in what Humbert sees as her fairy-like elusiveness, prompts his effort to "immortalize" her in verbal form, but whose youth, marginality and lack of identity also embody a freedom Humbert, bound in high-modernist style to literary and aesthetic tradition, can never recognize.

If Willy Loman, the business-minded protagonist of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* with his dreams of success, represents everything that Humbert Humbert (and, arguably, Nabokov himself) would have found unacceptable about mid-century America, there are some significant parallels in the characterization of the two figures. As the action of the drama progresses, Willy Loman, the middle-aged

father, finds himself in an ever more precarious position, marginalized within a society where he no longer has a real role to play or contribution to make. Suffering at the outset what appears to be a nervous collapse, he is unable to get himself back on the road, loses his job, and finds that his putatively grown son Biff—to whom he turns in this moment of crisis—is in no position to cushion the fall. While ambiguous about the relation of characters to larger historical events (Biff's brother Happy is identified as a World War II veteran but Willy recollects—perhaps fantasizes—heading West with his father in a wagon train), the play is remarkably precise about Biff's age: he is thirty-four when he returns to the Loman house in a New York suburb after a number of years wandering about the American West. Biff has yet to find regular employment, has never settled down, has yet to marry, and all of this has become a bone of bitter contention between father and son. When Willy accuses Biff of being a “lazy bum,” an epithet directly connected with what would be normally expected of a young man of Biff's age, it is clear that Willy's disappointment is in direct proportion to the hopes he had invested in Biff when his “well-liked” son was a high-school football star and, indeed, in Willy's eyes, something like “a young god” with the world at his feet (54). But when Biff fails to graduate, he sets off for the West where he moves restlessly from place to place working at “twenty or thirty different kinds of job,” along the way, as he confesses to his mother, landing for a spell in jail for petty theft (16). He ends up as a ranch hand in Texas but then, for reasons more connected to Willy's hopes, feels a compulsion to return to the family home: “I'm thirty-four years old, I oughta be makin' my future” (17). In the midst of his ‘identity crisis,’ Biff falls under the sway of his father and, however ready Willy is to criticize his son, Biff's return rekindles his father's hopes. But just as Willy's ambitions seem to ride on Biff's efforts to re-start his life, Biff learns how desperate Willy

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has become; Willy has been contemplating suicide and Biff understands he must do whatever he can do to help. The father and his confidence in himself is thus dependent, as in Erikson's account, on the "guidance of the younger generation." It is out of Biff's concern that he agrees to approach Bill Oliver, his former employer, for a loan and start out anew in business with his brother.

The whole scheme backfires when Biff, waiting in Oliver's office, realizes his former boss would have no recollection of a former shipping clerk. Biff understands, at this moment, that he will never be the success his father wants him to be, and on this basis, Biff emerges as the voice of 'truth' in the drama: "I'm not bringing home any prizes any more, and you're going to stop waiting for me to bring them home!" (105). In the bitter charge Biff levels against Willy, against American business and what it does to those committed to its ethos, Biff, with his experience of the open West, is also the only character to envision an alternative. He can entertain his vision of a 'new frontier' partly because he remains an 'outsider,' a marginal defined by the fact that, as Biff himself puts it, he is still "like a boy" and thus untouched by the demands of adulthood. But in becoming the voice of hope and a new life out West, Biff, in his failure to achieve an identity, to become what his father wants him to become, evokes images synonymous with the individualism and freedoms America saw itself defending as leader of the "free world." The tragedy lies in this instance, in the fact, father cannot or is unwilling to accede to the son's vision. Even after Biff's "moment-of-truth" confrontation, Willy remains in the obsessive grip of a past when he was convinced his teenage son stood before a world of endless potential. Willy the father sacrifices himself for ideals—the success ethic (and the insurance payment)—the son will have nothing to do with.

In Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the age of the heroine Blanche DuBois is only mentioned once—at the birthday dinner her younger sister Stella has arranged for her where she claims to be “twenty-seven” (197), a figure immediately dismissed by her brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski. But Blanche's age becomes the issue on which the whole of the plot and her ultimate fate hinges. Aware that her chances of finding a husband are fading, Blanche makes a concerted effort to present herself as still youthful southern belle ready to respond to a man's attention—something she proves herself adept at when Mitch, Stanley's wartime ‘buddy’ and bowling pal, shows interest in her. Stanley, however, seeing in Blanche a rival, both for his wife's attention and that of his male ‘buddies,’ is suspicious from the beginning—suspicions not entirely unfounded. As Stanley learns, Blanche has lost possession of Belle Reve, the family estate, has lost her job as high-school English teacher, purportedly for sexual advances towards her students, and has been driven from her hometown for seducing young recruits from the nearby army base. While it can be argued that Blanche, in caring for the sick and elderly in her family (a responsibility Stella cannot face), displays a sense of responsibility we would associate with ‘adulthood,’ it is also clear that such responsibilities, on top of her husband's suicide, are tasks which become greater than her capacity for self-sacrifice and prompts her withdrawals into a world which lies beyond the suffering and death to which she is exposed. Arriving in New Orleans, she is bereft and without resources except for a demure manner and her uncanny ability to create around herself an aura of unrealized possibilities, fantasies in which she figures as both ingénue and tragic lover, a widow still obsessed by the death of her husband whom she had married after she “made the discovery (of) love when I was sixteen” (182).

As Stanley steps us his campaign to get at the ‘facts’ behind what he takes

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to be Blanche's web of "lies," she oscillates between clear-eyed perception of her situation and retreat into a world of sentimental nostalgia and phantom paramours. As Mitch is drawn closer to Blanche and is about to propose, Stanley receives word from his male intermediaries about her reputation, and warns Mitch that Blanche is not the exemplar of youthful innocence she pretends to be. Calling what he sees as Blanche's bluff, Stanley tells his wife that Mitch will not be attending the birthday party to which he had been invited, and that there will, in fact, be no engagement. The birthday—the fatal tabulation of yet another year passed—is experienced here as the sudden tightening of a vise, a moment in which Blanche's last prospects of marriage seemingly go up in smoke. In the scene which follows, Mitch, repeating Stanley's allegations, reappears to excoriate Blanche for concealing her age. Convinced by Stanley's account of her promiscuity and the fact she is not the southern-belle-of-tragic-past she pretends to be, he demands she reveal the truth. When he attempts to force himself on her, he only provokes her wrath—a preview of the penultimate scene in which Stanley attempts to seduce her in the belief he can prove once and for all that Blanche simply moves in whatever direction her libidinal urges take her.

Even if we see Blanche's actions as essentially 'innocent' (as she in her more demure moments sees herself) or simply, from Stanley's more 'realistic' perspective, as deliberately concealing her true motives to cope with the straits in which she finds herself, her predicament, as she and those around her see it, is fundamentally that of her 'age.' As the scene where Blanche succumbs to her reverie of the newsboy as "prince out of the Arabian Nights" (174) makes clear, she remains, whatever her actual age, perfectly capable of remaking the world, however momentarily, in ways that revive the image of herself as youthful lover. Youth or the appearance of youth are not, however, merely 'desirable' conditions.

These become for Blanche a matter of survival. Her failure to persuade Stanley and then Mitch, the one man capable of responding to her ‘youth,’ pushes her not simply to the margins of society—but into a world of delusion and madness.

In suggesting that “the human experience of time”—and the kind of story-lines such experience gives rise to—is determined by a new preoccupation with age, I would argue postwar American fiction and drama extends the critique of industrial, technology-based society which informed modernist efforts to recapture a subjective and more “authentic experience of time.” Indeed, postwar writers confronted even greater pressures to ‘conform’ as the United States sought to present a ‘unified’ front and committed itself to developing ever more advanced technologies to counter the threat the Soviets were perceived to pose. But as the nation mobilized for the Cold War, the prolonged periods of time youth and young adults spent in schools and university heightened the sense of distance between youth and adults who represented the interests of postwar society. If postwar literature displayed a special preoccupation with youth—on the one level, because youth posed a potential threat to national unity in a time of crisis; but also because youth, in its as-yet-to-be-determined ‘identities,’ was equated with freedom—it nevertheless also brought into question the position adults occupied. While the authority adults nominally represented haunts the work of Nabokov, Miller, Williams and many other writers of the postwar era, adults, as actually figured in fiction and drama of the period, are repeatedly shown to be victims, incapable of protecting or ‘guiding’ those they would be expected to take responsibility for. This failure can be situated partly in the context of the larger social and political transformation of postwar America, but more specifically in the context of new nuclear technologies and the quandaries of ensuring the protection of future generations when confronted

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with what to many at the time appeared to be the imminence of nuclear war. In calling for attentiveness to age (as measured from a specifiable date of birth) and how this may condition and enable but also restrict and thwart a subject's development in relation to the larger culture, I would suggest the need for an essentially historicist approach to the preoccupation by American writers with adolescence, and how the rise of youth subcultures in the early postwar era contributed to a social and ideological dynamic the effects of which—in the form of 'gender' and 'culture wars,' in the conservative and reactionary backlashes, in constant attempts to revive the legacies of postwar dissent—continue to determine in fundamental respects the social and political terrain across which Americans move today.

Notes

1. Lewis Mumford contrasts modern 'clock time' with the medieval preoccupation with 'eternity' and the ever-lasting life of the soul. In Mumford's account, the building of bell towers by churches in the late medieval period and the hourly or quarter-hourly tolling of the bells was intended as call to prayer or worship but, ironically, the bells heightened the sense of passing time and "the citizen began to forget his awful fate in eternity; instead, he noted the succession of the minutes, and planned to make what he could of them" (15). Donald J. Wilcox identifies the modern experience of time as "objective, continuous, all-embracing, and absolute" (3) with Isaac Newton's notion of "absolute time," which, in Newton's definition, "from its own nature flows equably without regard to anything external" (16).
2. Shoshana Felman refers to trauma as an 'event' whose 'repercussions are omnipresent' (xiv); Dori Laub to how trauma victims become convinced that "fate will strike again" (67). Kali Tali characterizes the traumatized subject as compelled "to tell and retell the story of traumatic experience, to make it 'real' both to the victim and the community" (21).

3. This is, of course, not to argue that earlier cultures were not conscious of age or of those at different stages of life. The awareness of age is a cultural universal. As J. A. Burrow has shown in his study *The Ages of Man*, schemas of human growth as a sequence of ‘life stages’ extend back to classical antiquity. The simplest of such accounts predicated an arc-like trajectory of three stages: ‘an ascending’ period characterized by growth and increasing mental acuity, ‘a peak’ in which one exercised one’s powers, and a ‘descending’ phase characterized by diminishing strength and growing infirmity. The discussion which follows focuses on the increasing precision with which human age was calculated, and the degree to which more precisely calibrated measures of age influenced perceptions of social position.
4. Given the dominance of ‘constructionist’ assumptions within cultural studies, any re-thinking of age and age-difference can seem something of a throwback to a time when human development was often understood purely in relation to physical growth. Indeed, there remains an aspect of age, growth, and the aging process that reaches so deeply into the physical dimensions of a human life, we concede it to pertain to something which lies ‘beyond culture.’ From the moment of conception we would seem as much in the grip of genetic inheritance (and its programming of growth) as in the realms of nurture and environment. Aside from what the purely cosmetic can achieve in terms of transforming/concealing, age and age-ing—at least until the recent past—was not at its most fundamental level a cultural variable. Notions like that of ‘second childhood’ were essentially metaphorical. Once born (however or under whatever circumstances such a ‘delivery’ might occur), a human being can no more avoid advancing from infancy to childhood and into adulthood, no more evade middle age and maturity than, finally, avoid death. In this sense we may feel at some fundamental level in a realm before which the claims of ‘culture’ must give way.
5. In his chapter in *Childhood and Society* on “the American Identity,” Erikson himself viewed what he would recognize as the tenuous nature of ‘identity’ as resulting from an American family structure characterized by absent fathers and the dominance of ‘mothers.’ The absence of fathers—which Erikson believed to be rooted in conditions going back to the early history of settlement and the special demands of frontier life—rendered problematic the sorts of identification which psychoanalytic theory identified as necessary to overcoming oedipal conflict and moving into adulthood. American males suffered, in Erikson’s account, from “a fragmentary” Oedipal complex and thus were handicapped in efforts to achieve

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full maturity (296).

6. The 'politics of age' in the postwar period are complex. Developments associated with the period—the conflict with the Soviet Union and the nuclear arms race which unfolded according to the technological rather than political imperatives (a nation's security was determined not by the exercise of political or strategic acumen but simply by 'throwpower' and megatonnage)—inevitably called into question the capability of adult authority, even at the highest levels, to determine or influence the course of events. For further discussion, see Jonnes, "'Don't Step on My Blue Suede Shoes'."
7. In suggesting that notions of 'childhood,' 'adulthood' and 'maturity' are cultural universals, I would argue that readers reflexively ascribe an 'age' to characters even where a character's birth age is not explicitly mentioned. 'Age' and awareness of age-difference are inevitably aspects of character in narratives centered on inter-generational conflict, a great central theme of Western literature. Any number of narratives in the Western tradition, beginning with the Bible and Homer's *Iliad*, center on conflicts between parent and child, or older and younger figures. Key episodes in Homer's *Iliad*, beginning with the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles, depict conflict between figures marked by differences of age. An argument could be made that Greek tragedy as a genre, beginning with Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, can be defined by plots generated around parent-child conflict. Of Shakespeare's characters, Polonius, Lear, Prospero are all clearly 'old' and their actions meant to be viewed as characteristic of a particular stage of life; Prince Hal is 'young;' Romeo is younger. Nevertheless, almost none of Shakespeare's characters are identified by birth age. Of the canonical characters, only Juliet's age is specified (she is thirteen). Jane Austen is more meticulous about age, specifying, for example, that Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* is twenty years old, Darcy twenty eight, but in both instances age is mentioned simply to signify the fact they are of marriageable age. Conflict in Austen's novels generally centers on class difference. For all the detail with which Charles Dickens describes characters, he is remarkably hesitant about specifying the ages of his characters. Even early modernist literature, given its concern with the temporal and 'les temps perdues,' remains ambiguous about the actual birth age of characters. Yeats' late poetry dwelt on themes of age and aging (see, for example, "The Circle Animals Desertion") and T.S. Eliot's Prufrock frets about his baldness, advancing age and opportunities lost, but nowhere does either poet mention a specific age.

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