Writing America into the Twenty-First Century

Writing America into the Twenty-First Century: Essays on the American Novel

Edited by

Elizabeth Boyle and Anne-Marie Evans

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INTRODUCTION

ELIZABETH BOYLE AND ANNE-MARIE EVANS

Why read American fiction in the twenty-first century?

In 2010, ten years into the new millennium, the American novel is in the midst of an exciting period of change. Changes at home, including 9/11 and the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, and changes abroad, including the ongoing involvement of the United States government in overseas conflicts and the global threats of terrorism and climate change, mean that the 21st century American novel has to respond with ever-increasing flexibility to new and challenging circumstances in its effort to record and reflect on American life. The aim of *Writing America Into the Twenty-first Century: Essays on the American Novel* is to explore American fiction at this crucial juncture in American history.

Broadly speaking, the twenty-first century is an exciting time for American Studies. Barack Obama's inauguration as the 44th President of the United States on 20th January 2009 signalled, for many, a new hope for America. Significantly, Obama resurrected the tradition, initiated by John F. Kennedy in 1961 but sidestepped by most other presidents including George W. Bush, of including poetry in the Inauguration Day ceremony and chose Yale University Professor and poet Elizabeth Alexander's specially written 'Praise Song for the Day.' This positioning of literary art on the political stage augers well for a sympathetic relationship between culture and politics as the new century progresses. Many of the essays in this collection acknowledge the impact of Obama on contemporary fiction, and the way that this new era in American history is affecting the country's literary output.

When this collection was originally conceived, our plan was to examine a range of American authors from around 1980 to the present day in order to present a general analysis of the type of novels produced in the United States over the last thirty years. We had no remit other than that the literary works discussed must fall into this time-frame. To our surprise, when we began to review essays, the overwhelming majority of submissions we received discussed male authors. Where was the work on

contemporary American women writers? Where were the articles on Toni Morrison, Marilynne Robinson, Siri Hustvedt and Joyce Carol Oates? It is tempting to speculate on the reasons for this (perhaps the looming idea of the Great White Male novelist has not quite loosened its grip on university reading lists and national reviews, despite frequent and persistent calls for change[1]) but we soon discovered we had work on a range of interesting male writers, both literary heavyweights and relative newcomers. Pressed by circumstance, we decided to divide our project rather crudely and offer up a collection of essays on male American writers working on the cusp of the twenty-first century, with a view to researching and preparing a similar collection on female American writers in the near future. We think the resulting collection is both exciting and illuminating.

What this volume offers, then, is an original collection of work that aims to situate male authors' writing within the particular historical location either side of the year 2000. This is not a selection of essays about masculinity (although some essays do address masculinity), nor does it offer a comprehensive survey of male American authors. Instead, it provides perspectives on a carefully chosen selection of thought-provoking texts produced by men over the past thirty years. The collection's strength is in its willingness to examine well-known and recognised authors (Philip Roth, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo) alongside writers who have more recently emerged into the critical field (Anthony Giardina, Daniel Suarez). The earliest text discussed in the collection is DeLillo's *The Names*, published in 1982, and the most recent are Hiaasen's *Nature Girl* (2006) and Suarez's *Daemon* (2006), with the remaining essays covering texts from the years between.

The essays in this collection have been divided thematically. The first section, 'Youth and Age' presents two analyses of ageing and identity. In 'A Gendered Approach to Ageing in Contemporary American Fiction: A Portrait of the Old Man in Philip Roth's *Everyman'* Alex Hobbs examines Roth's exploration of ageing in his fiction, focusing on the unnamed protagonist of *Everyman*. Against the backdrop of a youth-obsessed America, Roth's text defies literary trends and conventions to present the reader with an ageing protagonist, the universal figure reinforced by the novel's title. In 'Chasing After the Wind: The Adolescent Aporias of Jeffrey Eugenides' Rachel McLennan considers constructions of adolescence, sexuality and youth culture in Eugenides' novels *The Virgin Suicides* and *Middlesex*. By analysing narrative modes and the complex function of gender in Eugenides' work, McLennan demonstrates the importance of contemporary ideologies of adolescence and youth in twenty-first century writing.

The second part of the collection, 'War and Crime' moves away from the first section's focus on self and identity to examine the broader concepts of nation, conflict and politics. Leonard Wilcox critiques DeLillo's analysis of terrorism as a contemporary phenomenon in 'Don DeLillo Terrorism and *The Names',* exploring how an awareness of terrorism has become synonymous with a sense of national identity in America, and drawing crucial parallels with the real-life events of September 11th, 2001. Jenna Pitchford's essay, 'The American "Other" in the Gulf War Novel: Writing Race and National Identity in Christopher John Farley's *My Favourite War'* interrogates concepts of the American military through an analysis of African American author Farley's Gulf War novel, demonstrating how his text problematises ideas of a unified American identity. Finally, Alan Gibbs ventures into the world of the comic crime writing in '"Listen to him, Mr. Take-Charge": Gender Politics and Morality in Carl Hiaasen's Crime Novels'. Gibbs highlights how Hiassen's writing and 'cartoon realism' subverts crime fictions stereotypes and continually deconstructs perceptions of gender. This section, therefore, seeks to address issues of 'War and Crime' on all levels: national, political and personal.

Part Three focuses on texts that in some way engage with the idea of 'Culture'. Each essay looks at this term from a different and clearly defined theoretical position. For example, in '"Feel like we been in a movie of the week!" The Politics of Television in Pynchon's *Vineland',* David Turton explores the uses of television in Pynchon's prose in terms of cultural materialism and cultures of paranoia. By placing the media, visibility and technology at the centre of a discussion of *Vineland*, Turton situates his response to Pynchon firmly within twenty-first century culture. Concluding this section, Francesca De Lucia interrogates another perception of 'Culture' in her analysis of the work of Anthony Giardina. Her article, 'Anthony Giardina as a Representative of the "Renaissance" of Italian American Writing' places the writer within the context of other Italian American writers of recent years, allowing de Lucia to explore this new wave of examining modes of ethnic identity in contemporary American writing.

The final section of the collection, 'Spaces and Patterns', offers two very different analyses of two very different novels. Anthony Warde considers concepts of mapping, space and journeys in '"Justified in the World": Spatial Values and Sensuous Geographies in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road'.* By tracing a relationship between linguistics and spatial awareness in *The Road* (a film version of which was released in 2009, making this analysis all the more timely for a collection exploring

contemporary authorship), Warde is able to explore McCarthy's engagement with cartography in terms of morality and self-definition. The final essay in the volume, Will Slocombe's 'Of Machine Gods and Technological Daemons: Divine Patterns in Contemporary Fictions of Technology' offers a refreshing contrast to traditional understandings of space, technology and patterns. Through an analysis of Daniel Suarez's 2006 novel, *Daemon*, Slocombe offers a study of patterns of thinking about technology that are constructed in relation to religious paradigms. This examination of technological power and divinity considers computer systems, communication and intelligent design in this response to a very twenty-first century novel.

Overall, then, each essay in this collection seeks to explore the directions in which the American novel continues to evolve. Two writers in this collection, McCarthy and Eugenides, have won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in the last decade, and by examining texts from the 1980s up to the present decade, these essays that follow in the next pages aim not only to provide a critical perspective on some of the novel's developments in those crucial years leading up and into the twenty-first century, but also to gesture towards the shape of things to come.

Notes

[1] See, for example, Francine Prose, 'Scent of a Woman's Ink: Are Women Writers Really Inferior?' *Harper's Magazine* (June 1998), 61-70; and Elaine Showalter's new survey of American women's writing, *A Jury of Her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx* (New York: Random House, 2010).

PART I

YOUTH AND AGE

A Gendered Approach to Ageing in Contemporary American Fiction: A Portrait of the Old Man in Philip Roth's *Everyman*

Alex Hobbs

Certainly many western cultures favour youth over old age, yet this is perhaps especially true of America. Since the fifties, the United States has been a youth-centric nation, focussing on teenagers and pre-middle-aged adults as a primary market for industries and an attentive audience for cultural output, long before other nations recognised teenagers as a distinct group. Indeed, America has always been a country that has rewarded youth; after all, the American Dream is only attainable to those who have the energy to go after it. Perhaps consequently, age remains one of the last acceptable prejudices in American society. This was made abundantly clear in the media coverage of the 2008 US Presidential election, where much was made of the age difference between the two candidates, Barrack Obama and John McCain, and their respective and resultant abilities to cope with the responsibilities of office.

Gerontologists agree that in the West there is the same ingrained prejudiced hierarchy towards age as there is with any other pair of descriptive terms (able/disabled, white/black, etc); as Daniel J. Levinson surmises: "[t]he connotations of youth are vitality, growth, mastery, the heroic; whereas old age connotes vulnerability, withering, ending, the brink of nothing".[1] Indeed, Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs note that this ageism has only worsened in recent decades:

> While negative attitudes toward old age have been in evidence for centuries, they have rarely played the role that they do in contemporary society. What is unique about the ageism of modernity is that it is represented in numerous institutional practices that treat 'agedness' as a proxy for poverty, neediness and proximity to death.[2]

The social stigma attached to age has been consistently compounded by negative portrayals in the media. In *The Fountain of Age* (1993), Betty Friedan argues that age is almost universally represented as a decline: a movement away from life towards death, rather than a significant part of life itself. It is not simply the case that youth is favoured, rather, images of old age are wilfully hidden. Friedan was not surprised to find age underrepresented in television, film, magazines, and advertising, but was confused by an unwillingness to use images of age when they alone were appropriate. In her survey for such images, she discovered that advertisers used models far outside the appropriate age demographic for products like arthritis medicine, and that in celebrity interviews and profile pieces, often the photograph accompanying the text was many years out of date.

Such evidence has led Peter Öberg to confirm that the "misery perspective" of age is the most prevalent in society. Yet Öberg is hopeful that "new images for older people in popular culture where they—especially the young-old—are looking and dressing youthfully, having sex, dieting, actively travelling, and so forth" are now emerging.[3] As Gilleard and Higgs confirm, "[r]esisting not just old age but ageing itself is becoming an integral component of many adult lifestyles".[4] This, of course, can have a negative impact; adults entering old age are under pressure to conform to "an unspecified but pervasive lifestyle aesthetic", creating a new homogeneity of age based on youthful appearance and not diversity.[5] Rather than this rigidity, what most gerontologists try to underline through their work is the many spectrums of age, and age that is classified in a variety of ways. Sarah Munson Deats and Langretta Tallent Lenker categorise several types of age, all of which may be applicable in describing the age of an individual:

> [C]hronological age (the numerical total of years lived), biological age (the strength, health, vigor, and elasticity of the body, which frequently bear little relationship to chronological age), social age (the culturally constructed, often prescriptive behaviours arbitrarily linked to a chronological numeral), and individual age (our own self-image, which is often at variance with all the other markers of age).[6]

As in factual media, Anne M. Wyatt-Brown has recognised that historically, older characters are not commonly the protagonists of fiction; she states:

> Our collective understanding is that Anglo-American literary criticism, like the society from which it springs, until recently has been uncritically ageist. For many years most novelists, poets, and playwrights have

> hesitated to make older characters the central protagonists for fear that such works would not attract many readers.[7]

Yet as gerontology has grown as a field of study, Barbara Grey Waxman has noted a parallel rise in fiction about old age and a comparable goal to redress negative stereotypes. Waxman has termed this fiction *Reifungsromane*, which she explains as "novel[s] of ripening – opposing […] central tenet[s] to the usual notion of deterioration in old age".[8] Waxman claims that there are more female authors writing *Reifungsromane*—Sylvia B. Henneberg calls them "creative crones"[9]—than men, and cites Simone de Beauvoir's investigation into the dual challenges of being an ageing women, and her hope for an ageless society set out in *The Coming of Age* (1970) as an important catalyst for this creative output. Waxman recognises that while age discrimination is illegal, "socially the artificial divides between youth and age still exist, with patriarchal culture assigning identity and social value to individuals on the basis of age and elders being devalued" (8). Thus, it is her contention that women are more affected by age than men and as a corollary are more often driven to address it in fiction, which is proven by the relative absence of male authored *Reifungsromane* against the comparative wealth of examples created by women.

Through her study of female-authored *Reifungsromane*, which includes such writers as Felicia Lord, Marcia Ivory, and Jane Somers, Waxman has been able to generalise its characteristics:

> While *Reifungsromane* do not paint a uniformly rosy picture of old age—they include themes of physical and psychic pain; loneliness; alienation from family and youthful society; self-doubt; feelings of uselessness; and grief over the loss of friends, mental acuity, and physical energy—there is, nevertheless, an opening up of life for many of these aging heroines as they literally take to the open road in search of themselves and new roles in life. (16)

Reifungsromane, then, are journeys that dispel stereotyped notions of weakness in old age by presenting "newly self-knowledgeable, self-confident, and independent" women (17). Henneberg recognises a similar ownership of old age in Sarton's poetry but rather than creating new positive aspects to ageing, she shows how Sarton finds strength in what most would consider negative effects of the ageing process; she states:

> [Sarton] truly embraced her aging body, and her love affair with solitude, another condition often associated with old age, is well known. Her ability to accept and even claim many things we generally shun—dependence,

> passivity, solitude, even the wrinkles—as normal, useful, and beautiful is certainly radical. It shows that old age is worth venturing into because it clearly has something to teach that those who are younger do not know. (par. 18)

In her poetry, Sarton suggests that in old age some physical limitation is not only acceptable and natural but, if embraced, can be truly liberating; in senescence, activity and involvement can be completely on the terms of the individual.

Both Sarton's approach and that apparent in *Reifungsromane* as defined by Waxman, offer portrayals of age that reject depressing stereotypes and deviate from negative typecasts, and therefore promote a different archetype: the "Well Elder" character. Explained by Kirk Combe and Kenneth Schmader in their consideration of Shakespeare's older male characters, this is someone of advanced years in "excellent health [with] independence".[10] Diametrically opposed—and often the protagonist of negative representations of age—is the "Frail Elder", who is typified as one suffering with "declining functional status and concerns and inadequate care by other family members […] [and] a gradual, progressive decline in memory, intellectual performance, and orientation".[11] These critics recognise a "spectrum of aging at work" throughout Shakespeare's plays, identifying Prospero as a "Well Elder" and Lear as a "Frail Elder".[12] Thus, while negative representations of age may be more common in male-authored literature, their analysis highlights a range of portrayals available in the literary canon.

Popular thought—endorsed by some feminist critics—has presumed that women have been more disadvantaged by age than men, as, historically, their power has been rooted in their sexuality and appearance. In contrast, there is, as Wyatt-Brown notes, a widely held "myth that men are exempt from the influence of aging".[13] Chris Holmund reflects this argument in his analysis of American film; he writes

> [That] men are 'permitted' to age, i.e. to have long careers in film, is taken for granted, dismissed as self-evident, with merely the occasional flip comment offered regarding Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon's repetitive romps or Sylvester Stallone's latest 'come back'.[14]

However, this disparity in the way age is accepted for men and women has disadvantages for men too. In a special issue of *The Journal of Men's Studies* dedicated to age, Edward H. Thompson Jr agrees that age is an aspect of masculinity that is often ignored:

> To all intents and purposes, growing older seems to be outside conceptualizations of masculinity. In most discourses one can be masculine and one can be old, but not both […]. Normative masculinity became and remains embodied by middle-age and younger men, both in the mass culture and in men's studies. The upshot is our pluralistic ignorance of nearly 20 percent of the adult men in the nation.[15]

To overlook these men is to exclude them from the spectrum of masculine identities and therefore suggest that, after a certain point in life, masculinity diminishes with age. Öberg's extensive research has shown that men themselves accept this theory; he writes, "[t]he proportion of men who think they look masculine decreases with each successive age group […]. There is no significant comparable change among women who believe they look feminine".[16] Thus, like stereotyped formations of femininity, masculinity is also perceived as situated in a physical realm. In *Reclaimed Powers* (1987), David Gutmann avers:

> In settings in which elders have the social leverage to arrange matters according to their own priorities, we find striking evidence of new development in both the male and female personalities in later life, the emergence of new executive capabilities that go beyond mere adjustment to imposed loss.[17]

He suggests that while in their active parenting years, adult men and women are forced into stereotypical sex-roles, older adults, however, are relatively free from these responsibilities and can become more androgynous. He views this removal of strictly gendered identity as a positive transformation, but it is this similar loss of a definitively gendered role that Öberg isolates as cause for masculine anxiety in his research.

Furthermore, in addition to the importance of appearance, masculinity is also linked to usefulness, i.e. the capacity to retain employment and provide for the family. Consequently, retirement can be a serious wrench for a man (something that is not necessarily reciprocated in women due to more frequent career breaks for pregnancy, child care, etc.). Thus, masculinity may be judged largely in physical terms—appearance and activity—because there is no longer any masculine value assigned to wisdom; as Öberg notes:

> We who are approaching old age can hardly remember a time when older people were respected, looked up to, venerated for their wisdom. We can't see ourselves in biblical images of prophets with white beards or in the anthropological lore of times before literacy, before printing press, radio,

> television, computer, when the elders were the repositories of the accumulated knowledge, wisdom, history, and traditions of the tribe.[18]

Conforming to social pressures, men hoping to retain a powerful image must therefore indicate that their body is as competent as those of youthful men around them.

While fiction concerned with old age seems to be more common for women writers offering ageing female protagonists, there are examples of old male characters written by men in American fiction, from canonical writers like Ernest Hemingway (for example, *The Old Man and the Sea* [1952]) to contemporary authors like Paul Auster (*The Brooklyn Follies* [2005]) and Cormac McCarthy (*No Country for Old Men* [2005]). While many writers include one older male character within a characterscape of others (in John Irving's *The Cider House Rules* [1985], for example), it is still quite unusual for a novel's protagonist to be an old man.

Working against this convention, since the publication of *Patrimony* (1991), almost every work by Roth has had an ageing or elderly central character—with the notable exception of *Indignation* (2008)—as Roth himself has remarked, "I don't think anybody's gotten out alive in my last five books".[19] While his other novels look at how an aspect of the protagonist's life is affected by age—work in *Exit Ghost* (2007), sex in *Sabbath's Theater* (1995)—*Everyman* (2006) has no storyline as such, only the consideration of the ageing process on the unnamed protagonist. Indeed, by leaving his protagonist unnamed, such anonymity allows age itself to become the main character of this text.

In the novel, the omniscient narrator reviews the life of the everyman character, paying particular attention to his last years, and in doing so addresses universal fears of ageing. The aspects of age that are identified are wholly negative; catalogued are health problems, body changes, depression, loss of friends and family members, and care-giving issues. Although there are moments when the protagonist's retirement has the potential to become a Third Age in which he could experience creativity, this is quickly negated by depression and fear. As Roth commented in an interview with Mark Lawson, it is a novel of illness:

> The narrative line […] follow[s] the history of a man's illness. Therefore, the moments when he's well and healthy, I pass over in a paragraph. I think I say, twenty-two years passed and he felt great. And I'm not interested in that.[20]

From the outset, then, Roth is only interested in the "misery perspective" and the "Frail Elder".

The protagonist has suffered illness throughout his life, but in old age, his body is unable to recover from each successive blow. In his advanced years, he becomes more aware of his body's problems, as shown by the minutely descriptive scenes of surgery, for one of which he remains conscious:

> [T]he operation lasted two hours and his head was claustrophobically draped with a cloth and the cutting and scraping took place so close to his ear, he could hear every move their instruments made as though he were inside an echo chamber. But there was nothing to be done. No fight to put up. You take it and endure it. Just give yourself over to it for as long as it lasts.[21]

This sentiment represents the protagonist's approach to the ageing process as a whole: he has no control over where his body will take him and when his life will end. The accounts of operations also show the lack of care afforded the elderly; on separate occasions, he finds EKG pads and an IV needle still affixed after he is released from hospital (74). This helplessness and disregard that he experiences in old age is clearly pitted against the attention he receives in hospital as a child, and the respect he must have demanded as an advertising professional.

The continuation established with surgeries in both periods of his life, points to what Friedan calls, "the unadulterated horror of second childhood, a vision of ourselves regressing to a childlike state".[22] When the recognition of being a vital adult is removed, all that remains is a childlike existence; as Jeff Hearn has asserted, "beyond a certain point, the older the man, the weaker he becomes not just physically and bodily, but also socially".[23] To be treated as a child is the ultimate sign of this weakness, but, as Friedan argues, the elderly are forced into this position by social stigma not necessarily by their own frailty.

The protagonist is himself guilty of these perceptions of ageing. At first he seems happy at Starfish Beach retirement village, describing his new home in terms akin to a holiday resort. He sets out with good intentions to keep his body and mind active:

> As soon as he moved into the village, he turned the sunny living room of his three-room condo into an artist's studio, and now, after taking his daily hour-long four-mile walk on the boardwalk, he spent most of the remainder of each day fulfilling a long-standing ambition by happily painting, a routine that yielded the excitement he'd expected. (64)

He decides to keep himself busy by running art classes in the village. Though he is of a similar age to those he teaches, at first, he does not

consider himself old like them. In his recognition of them as old, he realises he relates to them as he might children:

> He tried to link painting to play rather than to art by quoting Picasso to them, something along the lines of their having to regain the child in order to paint like a grownup. Mainly what he did was to replicate what he'd heard as a kid when he started taking classes and his teachers were telling him the same things. (83)

Soon, however, the protagonist appears to regress too. He begins by retiring to the place he was happiest as a child, which is a place already associated with death due to the stories he heard in his childhood of dead bodies washing up along the shoreline. This, coupled with the hospital visits in youth and old age, establishes a time-loop. However, instead of the return to childhood signifying a rebirth, rather, it is an indicator that he will soon have no life left. This is underlined by the repeated references to time, such as his father's watch and jewellery store, his interest in the mechanics of watches, and the Hamilton watch that gets passed from father to protagonist to daughter on death; as Roth says, there is "great resonance in my having my hero play with these things".[24] Time is moving forward but the old people in the village, including the protagonist, are not. It is noted that "they spoke of how rapidly the months and the seasons and the years went by, how life no longer moved at the same speed" (80), but while time may pass, they do nothing with it.

Retirement villages that compartmentalise on the basis of advanced age have been proven by gerontologists to be unhealthy and ultimately damaging for those who are institutionalised. This was explored in Disengagement Theory, propounded by Elaine Cumming and W.E. Henry in the sixties, and reiterated by Friedan. While declined social activity may previously have been considered normal, recent studies now stress the importance of continuous social engagement. Levinson similarly identifies a "primary developmental task of late adulthood is to find a new balance of involvement with society and with the self".[25] He goes on to state that "[i]f a man creates a new form of self-in-world, late adulthood can be a season as full and rich as others".[26] This sociological scholarship is reflected in the sentiment of Sarton's poetry; although some renegotiation of activeness may be necessary in age, she shows that senescence does not demand a complete removal of activity and responsibility. Against this positivity, as time moves on for the protagonist of *Everyman*, he is stripped of these things that define his masculine identity.

Returning to Öberg's hypothesis that men view their masculinity as physicalised, it is in the protagonist's sexual identity that he finds his self-

belief in his masculinity most lacking. In his review of the novel, Stephen Metcalf wrote that Roth's focus on sex was unrealistic, that sex drive in a character of this age was unconvincing: "[n]o doubt Roth's own vanity, his celebrity writer's sense of seigniorial privilege, has led him to over-associate the horror of dying with the loss of sexual vitality".[27] However, as sexual potency is such an integral facet of masculinity—both for men personally and the social perception of men as a collective—the charge of over-associating is unwarranted. Love/lust and death are often linked in literature, and society more generally; in *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (1998), Jonathan Dollimore contends, "[t]hat there are connections between death and desire is a commonplace, but perplexing one; after all, desire is on the side of life, life is opposed to death, therefore desire also must be opposed to death".[28] He expands, arguing that "what connects death with desire is mutability – the sense that all being is governed by a ceaseless process of change inseparable from *an inconsolable sense of loss somehow always in excess of the loss of anything in particular*".[29] Echoing Dollimore's critical analysis, Roth has explored this pathos at length in the character of Mickey Sabbath, who not only wards off his own mortality by reaffirming his sexual vitality but also seeks to lose himself in these exploits as a means of avoiding grief over the loved ones he has lost. Indeed, the sexual identity of older men is something of a defining leitmotif for Roth's later fiction, uniting the unnamed protagonist, Mickey Sabbath, Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain* (2000), Nathan Zuckerman in *Exit Ghost*, and David Kapesh in *The Dying Animal* (2001).

Resisting the decline of virility has become increasingly important for masculine identity in youth-obsessed American society. For this reason, Viagra has been a very important development; as Öberg avers, "Viagra is a way for men to perform important self-work, restoring a phenomenological sense of the youthful, sexualized self".[30] While not chemically enhanced in the novel—unlike Coleman Silk—the protagonist comes to appreciate sexual promiscuity late in life; around the age of fifty, he embarks upon a series of affairs with much younger women. These adventures, while destroying his marriage, give him a renewed vigour. His soon to be ex-wife, Phoebe, explains this difference between men and women when she says:

> The man loses the passion for the marriage and he cannot live without. The wife is pragmatic. The wife is realistic. Yes, the passion is gone, she's older and not what she was, but to her it's enough to have the physical affection, just being there with him in the bed, she holding him, he holding her. The physical affection, the tenderness, the comradery, the closeness

> […]. But he cannot accept that. Because he is a man who *cannot live without*. (122)

Phoebe identifies the protagonist's affairs as pursuits to find passion, but perhaps they are also proof of his virility; these acts are a reaffirmation of his masculinity at the point when society perceives it as diminishing, as noted by Hearn.

Although the protagonist has a relatively late flush of sexual power, it does not last; he meets a girl whilst walking along the beach and considers:

> Thirty years ago he wouldn't have doubted the result of pursuing her, young as she was, and the possibility of humiliating rejection would never have occurred to him. But lost was the pleasure of the confidence, and with it the engrossing playfulness of the exchange. He did his best to conceal his anxiety—and the urge to touch—and the craving for just one such body—and the futility of it all—and his insignificance—and apparently succeeded. (133)

While the girl seems interested and takes his phone number, she does not contact him, indeed, she changes her jogging route to avoid him. The protagonist realises that he has lost this aspect of his masculinity; he may be attracted to others but they are not attracted to him:

> He neither possessed the productive man's male allure nor was capable of germinating the masculine joys, and he tried not to long for them too much. On his own he had felt for a while that the missing component would somehow return to make him inviolable once again and reaffirm his mastery, that the entitlement mistakenly severed would be restored and he could resume where he'd left off only a few years before. But now it appeared that like any number of the elderly, he was becoming less and less and would have seen his aimless days though to the end as no more than what he was – the aimless days and the uncertain nights and the impotently putting up with the physical deterioration and the terminal sadness and the waiting and waiting for nothing. (160-1)

Like Mickey Sabbath, the protagonist equates life with being sexually attractive to another, which includes the opportunity to be sexually active. The protagonist does not feel old because he is unable to perform sexually but because he can no longer attract a partner.

However, the protagonist's desires are not completely physical; while he craves sexual excitement, he also desires its opposite, stability:

> Contrary to what his wife told everyone, he hadn't hungered after the wanton freedom to do anything and everything. Far from it. He hungered for something stable all the while he detested what he had. He was not a man who wished to live two lives. He held no grudge against either limitations or the comforts of conformity. (31-2)

He wants to replace one crumbling marriage with a new one that can be started from the beginning, with the same excitement but also with the same permanence. As he gets older, this need for stability increases; what may be considered boring in early life (and is identified as a cause for flight in male characters in American fiction by Leslie A. Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* [1960]) is essential in later life.

Yet the protagonist has little companionship at all. The protagonist's funeral emphasises his isolation; his brother's eulogy focuses upon childhood events and his daughter, Nancy, almost entirely leaves out her father, giving a history of the graveyard instead. This suggests there was little of worth in his adult life, again reinforcing his nameless unimportance; his funeral is described thus:

> Up and down the state that day, there'd been five hundred funerals like his, routine, ordinary […]. But then it's the commonness that's most wrenching, the registering once more of the fact of death that overwhelms everything. (14).

As the second part of this quotation suggests, perhaps everyone is nameless to some extent. In another powerful graveyard scene, this time in *Sabbath's Theater*, Mickey Sabbath reads the headstones; each stone proclaims the deceased's belonging to another: "Our beloved mother Minnie. Our beloved husband and father Sidney. Beloved mother and grandmother Frieda […]" and so on for a full page. Imagining his own headstone, he thinks, "[b]eloved Whoremonger, Seducer, Sodomist, Abuser of Women, Destroyer of Morals, Ensnarer of Youth"[31]; yet he is beloved of no-one, and has no-one left to mourn him. While the protagonist of *Everyman* may have such relatives to potentially mourn him, none seem especially affected by his death.

The protagonist is an ordinary everyman like anyone else; his life may not be exceptional but it is still decent:

> He was reasonable and kindly, an amicable, moderate, industrious man, as everyone who knew him well would probably agree, except, of course, for the wife and two boys whose household he'd left and who, understandably, could not equate reasonableness and kindness with his finally giving up on

> a failed marriage and looking elsewhere for the intimacy with a woman he craved. (30-1)

By making the protagonist so ordinary, I would argue that Roth elevates this negative portrayal of an individual's ageing into a generalised comment on the ageing process for men as a demoralising and emasculating descent.

In the protagonist's fear of how he will be remembered, Roth indicates the importance of legacy to older masculine identity. The protagonist worries that he will only be remembered for his mistakes, that he will be thought of as a flawed or weak man. This masculine anxiety is especially tied to his sons; he is conscious that he should have been a better male role model. At this late stage in his life, however, he has to accept that he has no control over his legacy. This realisation makes him angry but he is resigned to it: "[t]his is the man I have made. This is what I did to get here, and there's nothing more to be said!" (97-98). Legacy, then, is another loss of control that Roth typifies as accompanying old age; as Janet L. Ramsey contends:

> The pathos of this book is rooted in Roth's portrayal of narcissistic inability to forgive. His hero cannot forgive himself, others, or providence. He cannot forgive himself for failing at his personal relationships and for not being the artist he might have been. He cannot forgive others for not living up to his expectations (or, in the case of his brother Howie, for transcending them). And he cannot forgive life itself for disappointing him in his dreams of immortality.[32]

In her study of *Reifungsromane*, Waxman notes that older female characters become increasingly self-aware in their latter years, and if they die in the narrative, "it is commonly after [the character] has grown in a significant way" (17). Although Roth's protagonist is self-aware, this awareness takes the form of resignation and bitterness not the positive transcendence that Waxman identifies in female-authored fiction.

In all the aspects of the protagonist's masculinity discussed, he personifies Öberg's research as he views himself as less masculine with his increasing years: "[m]y God, he thought, the man I once was! The life that surrounded me! The force that was mine! No 'otherness' to be felt anywhere! Once upon a time I was a full human being" (130). This proclamation distils much of what he feels throughout the novel: he believes himself a lesser man, that he has lost—and more importantly, cannot regain—all the facets of himself that gave him power in society. Although the protagonist links his descent to general humanness in the last

line of this quote, I believe the novel as a whole specifically ties his experience of ageing to his masculinity.

In their introduction to *Aging and Identity*, Deats and Lenker state that "the humanities have contributed to the construction of stereotypic images of aging in our society" but that they "can [also] be employed to deconstruct these images".[33] In Roth's narrative, clearly the image of age remains stereotypically bleak; indeed, his other novels with older male protagonists similarly follow the misery perspective. Unlike Waxman's journeys to enlightenment in *Reifungsromane*, the protagonist's positivity is decidedly short lived. He may come to terms with the actions of his past but he does not view his old age as a distinct period of his life, just an end to it; there is no "opening up" to his life, only a closing down. Nonetheless, *Everyman* dispels the myth that men are exempt from the effects of ageing. Roth portrays a character that is defined by his anxiety concerning his masculinity going into old age, which is largely the effect of a fundamental physicalisation inherent in the social construction of masculinity. Roth indicates the pressure of remaining vital—both in body and utility—for as long as possible in youth-obsessed America.

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Notes

[1] Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, x.
[2] Gilleard and Higgs, 'Ageing and its Embodiment', 120.
[3] Öberg, 'Image versus Experience of the Aging Body', 103.
[4] Gilleard and Higgs, 59.
[5] Ibid., 59.
[6] Deats and Lenker, *Aging and Identity*, 9.
[7] Wyatt-Brown, 'Introduction: Aging, Gender, and Creativity', 9.
[8] Waxman, *From the Hearth to the Open Road*, 2. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
[9] Henneberg, 'Of Creative Crones and Poetry'. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
[10] Combe and Schmader, 'Shakespeare Teaching Geriatrics', 35.
[11] Ibid., 38.
[12] Ibid., 34.
[13] Wyatt-Brown, 1.
[14] Holmlund, *Impossible Bodies*, 144.
[15] Thompson, 'Guest Editorial', par. 1.
[16] Öberg, 103.
[17] Gutmann, *Reclaimed Powers*, 6.
[18] Öberg, 42.
[19] McCrum, 'The Story of My Lives', par. 11.
[20] Lawson, *Mark Lawson Talks to Philip Roth*.
[21] Roth, *Everyman,* 70. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
[22] Friedan, *The Fountain of Age*, 56.
[23] Hearn, 'Imagining the Aging of Men', 100.
[24] Lydon, *Philip Roth*.
[25] Levinson, 36.
[26] Ibid., 26-7.
[27] Metcalf, 'Everyman's Complaint', par. 7.

[28] Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, xii.
[29] Ibid., xiii.
[30] Öberg, 120.
[31] Roth, *Sabbath's Theater*, 364, 376.
[32] Ramsey, 'Learning from *Everyman*', 57.
[33] Deats and Lenker, 1.

CHASING AFTER THE WIND: THE ADOLESCENT APORIAS OF JEFFREY EUGENIDES

RACHAEL MCLENNAN

Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) describes the suicides of five adolescent sisters in suburban 1970s Detroit. In an excellent analysis, Kenneth Millard claims that "it is important to recognise the novel as both a search for a point of origin and a historical explanation."[1] Its retrospective narrative is told by a "choral narrator"[2] who recounts experiences of an unspecified group of males profoundly affected by the suicides, and who ostensibly seek origin and explanation for the deaths and their own responses. Millard argues that the novel participates in a wider trend in American fiction about coming-of-age:

> The contemporary American coming-of-age novel is often aetiological in its search for origins: it goes back in a process of historical enquiry that recedes beyond the horizon of its protagonist's knowing. This process is particularly valuable because it defines an epistemology while simultaneously scrutinising the efficacy of that epistemology. This is a process that creates a document of historical analysis, the novel, which then stands as an historical record in its own right, a finished or accomplished aesthetic record of a search for a legitimate historical beginning. This search for a satisfying origin begins again and again in the contemporary American coming-of-age novel; almost every search ends in the full knowledge of the inadequacy of searches, every methodology results principally in an understanding of the limits of methodologies.[3]

Millard's argument is compelling but problematic, engaging in complex elisions and questionable distinctions between different searches for origin. Arguing that protagonists within coming-of-age novels undertake a search for origins, he also claims that the coming-of-age novel performs a search for origins. The novel (anxiously categorised as "historical analysis", "historical record", "aesthetic record") is more "knowing" than its protagonist. Its "historical enquiry" measures the success of the means