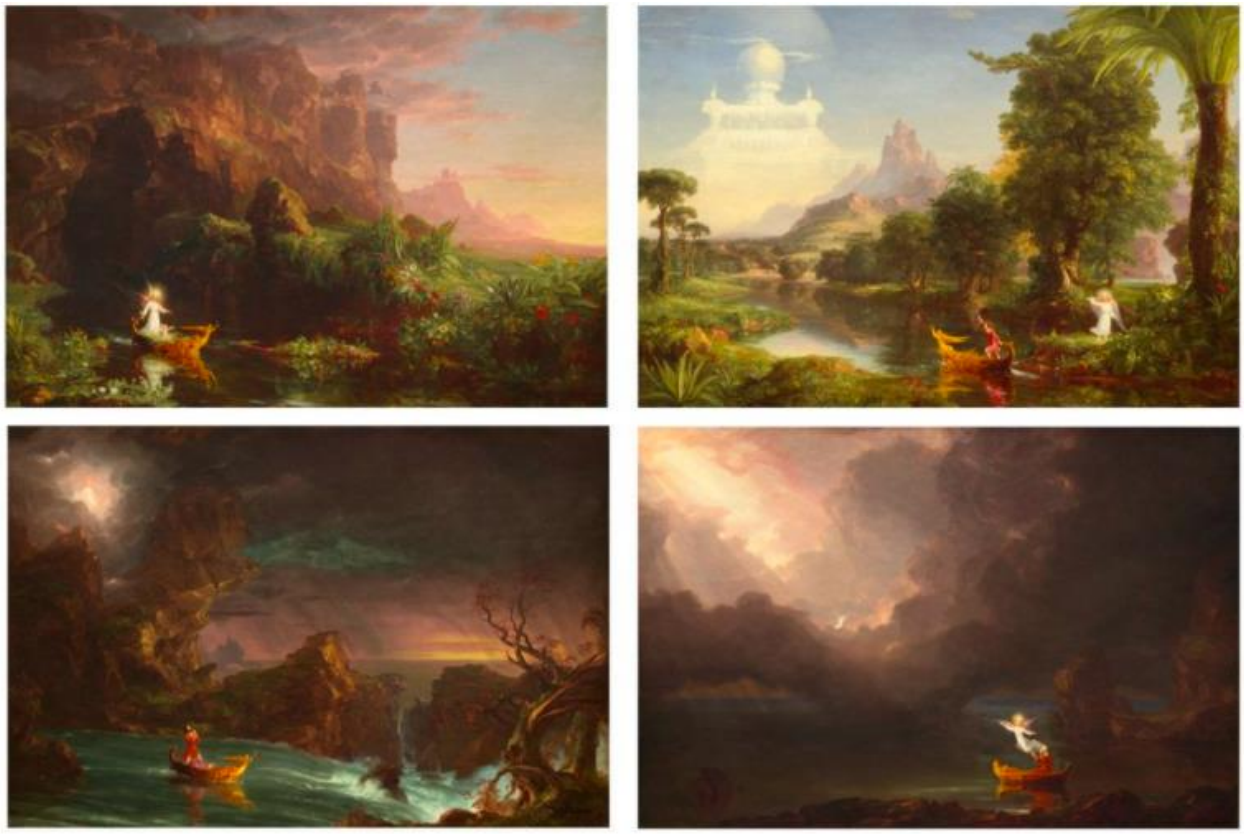
Grow Up: Adulthood in America
CC Alumni Reading Group Syllabus 2021-2022



Thomas Cole, "The Voyage of Life" (1836-1840)

Cultural changes in the last few decades have encouraged reimagining what it means to become an adult. Every era presents challenges, but the process of growing up has grown less clear than in earlier generations. Longer years devoted to education, fluid and sometimes frustrating job markets, plus new manners of dating and mating have delayed or scrambled conventional sequences of maturity's markers.

You might read the title of this class as investigating adolescence—the transition *to* adulthood—but our focus will be, instead, what constitutes having made the transition. Some scholars suggest that feeling "adult" is more a matter of mindset than external signifiers. That is, you become an adult when you *think* you are one. Or, more commonly, one actually might be a full-fledged grown up without really believing it's true. Recent guides to "adulting" address men and women who find this life stage better taken piecemeal or with irony.

Psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett assumed that finding a spouse and a stable job turned someone into an adult. He discovered, after interviewing college students in the 1990s, that for them "full-time work and marriage had nothing to do with it." Instead, he found young people claiming that the key criteria were "intangible and psychological: accepting responsibility for

one's actions, making independent decisions, and becoming g financially independent." Arnett's theory about emerging adulthood encouraged new ways of looking at the passage out of adolescence. The extended explorations—of twenties, even of thirties and forties—could be viewed not only as delay or transition into being grown up but life stages with their own integrity.

Some generalizations are in order, but first a caveat. Much complexity blurs clear transitions, and experiences vary for different groups across race, class, region, and other variables. Still, an overview of trends affecting adulthood can be useful. In the nineteenth century, the United States produced a fairly clear path to adulthood: education or training would lead a to a job whose character remained fairly constant until retirement, though allowing for social mobility. Courtship or dating would lead to marriage and childrearing. Before World War II, women made up about a quarter of the American women force. The war's end brought a baby boom and expanded educational opportunities for many veterans. By the start of the 21st century, changing social, economic ,and political conditions shifted expectations. More jobs presupposed college degrees. Work became more demanding and less stable. Men and women were more likely to live with partners before marrying, marry later, or chose not to marry at all. Women began bearing fewer children and or choosing to be childless. Lifespans showed potential for lengthening.

And then Covid happened! Effects wrought by the pandemic have not yet become clear in historical record. Its dislocations accelerated some changes and reversed others. Shutting down and reopening may have provided new space for reimagining independence, maturity, and responsibility—that is, for building back better.

+++

This discussion guide adapts material from a CC 325 seminar of the same title. Like the course, this syllabus can provide only an exploratory glance at a very broad range of material. As students joke when choosing research topics, almost anything might be included in a class on adulthood! Since we cannot do everything, we will spend time at start and end on conceptual themes. Conversations in between will focus on three categories commonly considered in the course of adulthood: work, relationships, and family life.

Centering our reading will be 2015 survey of American adulthood by historian Steven Mintz, *The Prime of Life*. *Prime*, as we will abbreviate the title, covers milestones and the way these have changed in the United States. Because the chapters cover so much, we will divide them across the sessions. Each week we will put other sources in conversation with Mintz, updating, contesting, or nuancing his outlines.

The historical approach Mintz takes produces a few important implications. First, he insists that material and political conditions of a time period change the shape of adulthood. That is, what is going on around us partially determines what we think is normal for adults. Second, movement through the past shows us evidence of both continuity and change. We can look back and try to explain why some events shaped adulthood in a certain way, even if those causal links were not

obvious at the time. At base, Mintz wants us to recognize that American adulthood *has* a history, that it is not just explicable by biology or psychology, the same across time and space. Adulthood deserves our attention because it is so consequential a period of life. By the end of the book, we see that Mintz wants this not to be just an abstraction but a "usable" past, showing readers why milestones were harder to reach at different points, inviting readers to build a good life in light of conditions they experience in their lifetimes.

Finally, the Mintz book is valuable not only as an abundant and analytical treatment of our subject. Its notes gives extensive suggestions for additional reading. Given the limits of these sessions, I hope readers will avail the fine bibliography Mintz gives for nearly any place where you wish to go deeper or branch out. in this syllabus.

Books

Steven Mintz, *The Prime of Life: A History of American Adulthood* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2015).

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties.* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) We will focus on the Preface and Chapter 1.

Note on books: *Prime* is used in all five sessions with chapters divided among themes of each. *Prime* is supplemented with other readings. Except for *Prime,* the discussions can be conducted without purchasing the whole book but using PDF chapters, articles, and links.

First Discussion: Developing Ideas of Adulthood

Reading:
--*Prime* Preface, Prologue, and Chapter 1
--Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties.* 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2015). Users can read the whole book, but discussion focuses on the Preface and Chapter 1, both free in PDF at http://jeffreyarnett.com/EAsecondedition.pdf

Introductory note
Tracing the history of adulthood, Mintz suggest that Americans arrived at a fairly standardized model by the nineteenth century and kept this intact until the mid-twentieth. He argues that religious change set a precondition for this model. Americans could embrace it only after they moved away from a mainstream Christianity that undercut the newer template of adulthood by prioritizing the afterlife and by emphasizing a turn rather—redemption or conversion—independent of age and instead of stadial progress.

The model from the nineteenth century allowed milestones or attainments to mark adulthood, rather than numerical age, maturity, or quality of character. He cautions against assuming adulthood used to be more predictable and well-formed, but also argues that we have less common understanding of its milestones and hallmarks now. *Prime* then will help readers see the historical construction of what we might take as "normal" adulthood, out of nineteenth-century conditions rather than abstract norms.

Arnett's analysis took shape in his theory of "emerging adulthood," at first controversial but now part of vernacular vocabulary. Arnett contended that this strange uncertain time in the twenties is not just an extended adolescence or mere transition but deserves its own integrity, This "emerging" period is characterized by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling "in between," but also receptiveness to possibilities. With *Prime* in mind, we can wonder what conditions in the late twentieth century shaped "emerging adulthood"? We can consider how these conditions have persisted: not only Americans in their twenties but full-fledged "young adults" now may feel still uncertain of having arrived. "Established adults" may be in their forties but still not certain of having attained hallmarks of maturity.

Discussion questions:

Before moving into texts, spend a few minutes on the images depicting 19th century imagination of adulthood on page 7 of *Prime*: Can you tell what distinguishes each level from the next? Or do some levels look basically the same as what came before/after? How do the stages differ by gender? What would a similar image look like if it featured present-day stages and props?

--Which cultural developments does Mintz count as prerequisite for our developmental view of childhood and adulthood to emerge? Does the adulthood template seem, to you, to fit well with religious understandings of maturity or not?

--When was the transition to adulthood comparatively clear, and what accounts for it becoming "tangled"?

-----Mintz guesses that adulthood seems unattractive to people now because the perks of it can be attained before actual maturity (67), so that only negatives come in actual adulthood. Do you agree?

-- Are most important divisions between adulthood and something before, or do phases of adulthood differ so much that they deserve different labels? Consider both Arnett and Mintz on this question.

--Does the United States lack rituals to mark adulthood? Where might we find these? Can we invent them if we want to?

--What do you think defines adulthood? Does Mintz cover all those criteria? Does Arnett?

--How do the defining characteristics of emerging adulthood relate to each other? For instance, might there be some connection between identity exploration and self-focus, or between either of those and feeling "in between"?

--Which of Arnett's adulthood-experience categories seem most interesting to you? Why?

--What would make emerging adulthood a happy phase of life? What supports (economic, social, cultural, familial) does it presuppose?

--What would enable an adult to exit this phase, confident of having "emerged"? Does emerging adulthood prefigure any tendencies likely to arise in the young adult's thirties or forties?

Second Discussion: Work

Readings:
Prime, Chapter 6 "Finding Fulfillment in Work"
David Graeber, "On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant," STRIKE, August 2013 (https://www.strike.coop/bullshit-jobs/)

Podcast: Ezra Klein, "Why Do Americans Work So Damn Much," Interview with James Suzman (*New York Times,* https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/29/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-james-suzman.html)

Introductory Note

For many, work is what gives most clear shape to adult life. Work can provide money, something to do with one's time, sociability, even a sense of purpose. Competence at a

particular job and advancement in it can help build identity and confirm maturity, whether in a craft, factory, profession, or household. Until fairly late in the last century, this category was among the most starkly gendered of adulthood, with paid employment an expectation more for men than women.

Increasingly in the United States, such steady work is exception more than rule. Geographic and social mobility, rise and decline of industries, economic booms and downturns, experiments in contingent employment—like our "gig" work—presuppose more fluidity than fixity in vocation, as Suzman confirms. Appropriate responses might be to desire more meaningful work or, contrarily with Graeber, to minimize bad jobs and seek meaning elsewhere. Some find work an effective measure of a life's accomplishments while, for others, employment is a smaller part of what matters most.

We are reading the *Prime* chapter out of sequence on grounds that education-to-work makes a clear path to adulthood for many. But this is not the choice Mintz makes in placing work within adulthood's arc, and discussions may wish to justify or oppose mine.

Discussion Questions

--Mintz suggests early in the book that economic disparities or class, rather than race, or gender, account for most differences in Americans' experience of adulthood. Does this generalization hold true for work?

--What is distinctively American about our work culture? How has this changed over time?

-- What relationship does the order of these chapters imply between education, relationships, family life, and work? Does this order make sense to you or would you shift sequence?

--Mintz treats higher education very briefly and not as preparatory to work. This approach has much to recommend it. What connections would you wish to make between college or university and future employment?

--Why does work have to be meaningful, "as a source of self-esteem and a pathway to personal fulfillment"(258)? If only some kinds of jobs can be meaningful, how should we understand changes in employment—what Graeber calls "bullshit jobs"?

--What measure determines whether work is "too much"? Consider what Suzman reports about hunter-gatherers in the "Why Do We Work" podcast.

--Until President Franklin D. Roosevelt sought full employment as a goal, labor movements in the United States sought not only better pay and safer conditions but shorter working hours and a shorter work week. Is there a limit to this goal? What would we do with the time if we worked less?

--Competition helps shape our view of work, as Suzman acknowledges. What kind of competition shapes work most desirably? Against what or whom?

--Much American television has focused on the office, not least the eponymous show. What kinds of work environments fare well in popular culture? Which are pitched to draw mockery or commiseration?

Third Discussion: Friendships, Relationships, and Marriage

Reading: *Prime,* Chapter 2, "Achieving Intimacy," Chapter 3, "I Do," Chapter 4, "I Don't" Katherine Jellison, *It's Our Day,* Chapter 1.

Optional Film: *When Harry Met Sally* (1989)

Introductory Note

These three chapters in *Prime* address some of the most important relationships of adulthood. Indeed, for women for much of U.S. history, being married practically constituted adulthood. Given how differently marriage fits in twenty-first century realities, current assessments of marriage tend to fall into one of two camps. Changes may be cast as a liberation, from legal status to love match—what Mintz calls a "Whiggish account." Or the opposite conclusion may be drawn from the data. Less than half of American households now are headed by married couples, gender roles blur, over half of marriages end in divorce, and many sexual and child-rearing relationships proceed outside the bonds of marriage altogether. Some see this as clear decline, even the "end of marriage."

Characteristically Mintz rejects both opposites for a more "complex" story, situating transformations in intimate relationships within a broader landscape of changed economy, sexual mores, and law. He credits young women with creating a new sentimentality. Again, characteristically, he finds continuities and discontinuities, to which I hope readers, with their varied perspectives, disciplines, and lived experience, may also consent or contest.

Discussions might argue with the implications of chapter composition here, which is why all three appear in this session's reading. You might wonder, for instance, about treating friendships and romantic love in the same chapter rather than keeping friendship on its own terms—and then doing love, dating, and marriage in a separate chapter. Or friendship and courtship might belong in one chapter, with marriage and divorce together in another. Feel free to argue with Mintz and with each other.

Katherine Jellison's *It's Our Day* puzzles over the persistence of big expensive weddings. Why, scholars have asked, did weddings get bigger when marriage itself seemed to grow less significant, occupying smaller portions of adult life and breaking up more frequently? Weddings

reveal much about the way people imagine marriage. Ours might be an especially interesting moment to consider shifts here, since Covid pushed many changes in dating, marrying, or finding alternatives.

The optional film, *When Harry Met Sally*, is a favorite for discussing relationships between men and women and has the virtue, for historical perspective, of moving through a few decades and being something of a period piece itself. Newer alumni may be approaching it for the first time but even those who have seen it many times or many years ago may find it fruitful in conversation with the texts.

Perhaps here more than any other session, it is necessary to concede the limits of these texts. Readings for this session do not of course cover all Americans' experience, and readers are encouraged heartily to pursue additional sources on same-sex marriage, interracial marriage, customs specific to particular religious traditions or ethnic groups, or institutionalized alternatives to monogamy. Those who wish to go further should consult the excellent bibliographic leads in the assigned readings.

Discussion Questions:

--Are men or women better at friendship? Why? How has the definition of friendship in America changed which one gender might appear likely to excel at it?

--Why have male-female friendships have been discouraged in some periods and encouraged in others?

--Marriage signaled attainment of adulthood for a period until the late twentieth century. How and why did it make sense to interpret marriage as a turning point for adulthood? How did this differ for men and women?

--Mintz treats marriage in one chapter and alternatives to marriage in another. Do you see "I Don't" as *really* a chapter on alternatives to marriage, or really a chapter on divorce?

--"I Do" discusses culture, demography, and social roles more than policy in characterizing marriage, while "I Don't" spends more pages discussing law. What accounts for this difference?

--How have marriage roles differed for men and women? Where is continuity or change most visible?

--How does Protestantism shape the culture of marriage in the United States?

--Why do some couples seek expanded access to marriage while others prefer to leave behind the institution altogether?

--Whose day *is* it, at a wedding? What does the ceremony imply about the couple's relationship to guests, family, or wider community? How have ceremonial changes reflected this context well, or now?

--How do wedding rituals reflect the significance of marriage? If the meaning of marriage has changed, should some rituals change or be excised? Which one?

Fourth Discussion: Family, Busy-ness, and Balance

Readings:
Prime, Chapter 5, "The Trials of Parenting"
Charles Darrah, "The Anthropology of Busyness," *Human Organization* 66 (Fall 2007) 261-69. See PDF
Rebecca Jo Plant, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), Chapter 5. See PDF
Keith Gessen, "Sports Meant So Much to Me. Why Wouldn't My Son Play?" *New York Times Magazine*, March 16, 2021 (https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/16/magazine/sports-children-kids.html) See PDF

Option film: *Fatherhood* (2021)

Introductory Note

Whether adulthood is marked by milestones or attitudes, external or internal measures of maturity achieved, taking care of a dependent can shift one's sense of self. This session considers some aspects of family history to consider how parenthood has been idealized, prescribed, and experienced as a major part of adulthood. Being mother or father reflects cultural scripts of appropriate behavior. Like other categories, standards for parents have changed a great deal in the last century. Duties ascribed to each role became less distinct, same-sex parents experimented with new strategies, and more intensive demands multiplied responsibilities. Home and family can complement or compete with one's vocation.

This chapter engages work Mintz has explored in an earlier book, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Harvard UP, 2006). There he emphasizes, perhaps not surprisingly, that there never was a "golden age" of worry-free children or parents. By that same logic, he dismisses periodic flare-ups of worry about the next generation (for example, p 215, "These panics were grossly exaggerated.") Mintz thinks the kids mostly are all right. Parenting fashions have, on the other hand, made adults' task more difficult. The language choice in this chapter title--"trials" of parenting--encourages us to think of the struggles of the task, but also various ways of approaching or "trying" to parent, as well as a judgment of different styles.

The additional readings investigate two particular facets of parenthood. A chapter from Rebecca Jo Plant's *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* (University of Chicago Press, 2010) studies pressures and prejudices applied to mothers in the mid-twentieth century. Gessen's personal essay explores a father's influence and limits. Darrah's proposal for an "anthropology of busyness" strives to understand why caring for families can seem like a job in itself and a race against time.

Discussion Questions

--How have roles and difficulties for mothers and fathers differed? Does one role seem more burdened than the other, intrinsically or by social arrangement? Does any period's priorities for mother or father seem to you more favorable than current arrangements?

--What did a "golden age of American childhood" look like, and do you agree with Mintz that change should not be read as decline (191)?

--Mintz notes that history helps us problematize "practices that seem natural, inevitable, or unquestionable," helping us see that "Contemporary American childrearing practices are distinctive in a number of ways (242). What *is* particularly American about the way we raise children?

--How do parents aim to raise children to resemble themselves? What are the limits of this ambition? What are the alternatives? Consider Gessen's essay here but also your experience.

--How does parental expectation or preference change the job of raising children? Consider Gessen observing his son making friends thinking, "Don't do it! Stay with the sad artsy boy. He is your true friend!"

--Is the "busyness" Darrah documents an inherent part of adulthood itself? Or just of parenthood? It is desirable to be more or less busy?

-- Darrah argues that households have taken on tasks not proper to them, with the result "a burgeoning collection of obligations designated as a family, but which could be…performed elsewhere." Is parenthood more or less attractive when "intensive"?

--Can parents choose how they wish to structure family life? Or are their choices constrained by something else? By what?

--Evaluate ways the fashions of different periods made parents behave differently, *simultaneously* considering what it would be like to be a child under this style of rearing. Does the most appealing system of parenting match what would be ideal for a child? If not, what might be done to square the differences?

Fifth Discussion: Age of Angst or Appreciation?

Readings:
Prime, Chapter 7, "Angst of Adulthood," and Epilogue
Kieran Setiya, "Facing Your Mid-Career Crisis: Should You Cope or Quit*?" Harvard Business Review*, March-April 2019, 135-39. http://www.ksetiya.net/uploads/2/4/5/2/24528408/hbr.pdf
See PDF.

Optional Film: *Free Solo* (2018)

Images:
--Cole, "Voyage of Life," (pictured above on syllabus and in detail at (https://www.nga.gov/collection/highlights/cole-the-voyage-of-life-childhood.html)

Introductory Note

How do Americans measure the satisfactions of adulthood? Kieran Setiya, a philosopher whose recent work focuses on the concept of "midlife," argues that a balance of "telic" and "atelic" pursuits is a good recipe for happiness.

Mintz judges similarly as he pursues both themes to the end of his book. Chapter 7 first explains how aging has come to influence views of adulthood. He notes that earlier views of growing old did not necessarily become morbid since death formerly was not associated with old age per se, many deaths occurring before age 45 in the United States. Changes in society and medicine suggest envisioning older years differently. Is a period of life that is no longer defined by work—one's "golden" or "geriatric" or "retirement" years--best seen as a capstone of adulthood or shift into something else? Mintz that mature years can be rich and rewarding. His argument gently pushes back at the attractions of youth: people can grow up without fearing that all the fun and interesting parts of life are over. Grown ups can even find that the weight of experience enhances life rather than breeding melancholy.

Discussion Questions

--Before addressing texts, look carefully at Cole's paintings of "The Voyage of Life." What do light and dark elements suggest in each panel? Which details most accurately depict adulthood and why?

--What does Setiya define as "telic" and "atelic" activities and how should they be balanced?

--Is the American dream mostly about "agency," that as Mintz puts it, "each person has the power to mold her or his destiny, to pursue a personal dream"? If so, consider Setiya's question, "how can doing what is worthwhile seem empty?"

--On the other hand, can doing what is apparently *not* worthwhile for any reason except sheer accomplishment seem full and necessary? Consider the choices of Alex Honnold in *Free Solo*?

--How might we assess adulthood if we think of it in terms of very different choices of vocation, like a military or religious one? Or like Honnold's choice?

--Coming to the book's close allows readers to revisit a question from the first session. Does Mintz include everything that belongs to adult life? Can you think of other important features of adulthood that he should include or expand?

--Citizenship might be one answer to the previous question. Is it surprising that Mintz says so little about public duties and privileges of adulthood, given that Americans attach considerable importance to maturity markers. (For instance, consider what 16, 18, 21, 25, or 65 mean in legal terms for adulthood.) How would you explain the place of citizenship into adult life?

--In light of the previous question, Mintz might have decided to discuss alcohol consumption at many other points in the book. How do you evaluate his decision to treat it where he does (319-24)?

--Distinctive to adulthood, Mintz argues, is experience with loss. Not only deaths of loved ones and one's own mortality but many other kinds of losses form the character of the mature person—in not only negative ways. Can you identify positive ones? Do you agree that "[e]mpathy for those in pain" is a "crucial aspect of maturity" (310)?

--Is there something distinctively American about adults' sense of disappointment? How does this vary in different periods, and do you agree that "our current cultural and historical context…accentuates adult regrets"?

--Adulthood can be "the richest time of life" (326) and "a work of art that we ourselves create" (331). Do either of these descriptions resonate with you? Are you glad to have to grow up?