

Adolescence

Is a rather specific period in a human life, the period which, 'in the west,' we reserve for the ages ten to nineteen. Naturally the stages and pacing of adolescence will vary widely with the gender and social condition of the individual or group in question, yet there are several reliable stages to the typical course of adolescence.

There is characteristically a growth spurt in the early teens—facial hair, pubic development, newly discovered need for privacy. The mid-teens witness a gradual development of socialization, girls characteristically in advance of boys in this regard. It is not until the end of this adolescent period that young men and women begin to emerge as the physical forms that they will carry through life. At the same time these at one point youngsters have been realizing the satisfactions of mind's play on mind, as the accretion of levels of insight builds a constantly more copious consciousness. The psychosocial configuration of this new personality begins for the first time to factor into the person world, the world of professions and organized work.

This brief account, of some major features of adolescence, will raise our awareness, once again, of the pressing importance of adolescence in American literary culture. Think back to some of the figures and texts—Tom Sawyer and Becky, Huck Finn, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, with its test of young manhood—and ask yourself what crucially important discovery processes were playing out for the new country in its adolescents. Like the young people in question in these fictions, the young nation of America could be seen struggling for self-definition. We have much to learn there.