

## “Will You Still Love Me When I’m No Longer Young and Beautiful?”

By Emily Chudzik

American popular culture has become obsessed with youth. The entertainment industry is consumed with looking for a fresh, new face to star in the latest “number one movie in America.” In her novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, author Jennifer Egan shows how life does not lose value after one ages. She argues directly against the notion that only the young can be successful and make something of themselves. Through her characters, she illustrates how there is so much to look forward to in life, and that success and happiness can be achieved at any age. Egan analyzes how our culture idolizes the young and how nostalgia has become a growing trend. Through this process, she illustrates that it is okay to look back fondly on memories, but it is not okay to live in the past.

The themes that Egan puts most emphasis and weight on throughout the entire novel are time and its relentless passage, the fear of failure, and keeping up appearances. She most clearly conveys these ideas through her characters. Almost all of her characters are associated with the entertainment industry, whether it be through music, Hollywood, or public relations with famous people. She does this to help strengthen her point that America is too focused on youth and “the latest trend.” Pop culture is used to help explain just how fleeting youth is, and to show how desperate some people are to retain it, although impossible. Certain chapters are dedicated to showing just how destructive it can be to focus so much on the past and neglect the present and future.

In pop culture, there is a type of “life cycle” that occurs every few decades. The industry is always looking for someone young and unfamiliar to be “the next big thing.” The Disney Channel, for example, is extremely guilty of perpetuating this phenomenon. Actors have come

and gone, starring in their own hit show one minute and then out of a job the next. This is especially true for females in the entertainment business. Unfortunately, most roles for women are written for youthful, energetic, sixteen to twenty-year-old “Baby Stars” who can “espouse the spirit of the modern age” (Addison). We are a culture that thinks to be young is to be better, and, in turn, we idolize youth. One such “recent” star that stands out for this reason is Lindsay Lohan. She was quite successful and well-liked in her youth. Until her fall from grace, she was popular with her intended audience and certainly reigned supreme.

Egan seems to model the character of Kitty Jackson off of Miss Lohan. In chapter nine, Kitty is nineteen years old, in the prime of her acting career. She is, of course, young and beautiful, with blonde hair, blue eyes, tanned skin, and a fit body. All of the possible opportunities that she has before her seem endless. At this time in the novel, she is well-loved and admired. She has a “mega-grossing movie behind her, half the world doing a rain dance at her window” (Egan 174). Hollywood is always looking for a new crop of stars, and Kitty was lucky enough to achieve her fame and high status. Her career begins to suffer terribly after she is assaulted by Jules Jones, the reporter who was interviewing her for a column one afternoon. Kitty’s ensuing bad behavior is what causes her to fall from grace, just like Lohan and countless others. Ten years later, at just twenty-eight, Kitty’s career seemed to be over. Her antics were “relentlessly cataloged” in the tabloids and “no one would hire Kitty anymore” (Egan 144). The average career of a star was reportedly five to seven years long, a mold which Kitty fits into perfectly (Addison). Egan illustrates through Kitty’s unfortunate downfall that if all one has is youth, he will not have a full and fruitful life. Youth is not the most important attribute a person can have. It cannot be the only thing that someone possesses; if that is the case, one will

ultimately be miserable. Egan establishes her point that youth is not everything because, like fame, it eventually fades. One will be left with nothing if he only puts stock in his youth.

It is fascinating how some stars achieve monumental fame only to be forgotten a few years later, and yet some remain timeless. In the “article” that he writes, Jules claims that Kitty is already being called the “Marilyn Monroe of her generation” (Egan 185). How is it possible that an actress who began her career in 1945 continues to remain so widely known and revered? Simple. She died young at thirty-six, managing to remain “forever young.” How would she be remembered today if she had at least reached age sixty? Would society still be enamored with her? Most likely not. Our modern culture is so fixated on youth, and Monroe is the perfect example. Stars that were hugely popular in their heyday, like Lana Turner, Paulette Goddard, and Glenn Ford, are now almost completely forgotten by younger generations. Why? They got old. Stars like Marilyn Monroe are still idolized and remembered because they remained young and beautiful. Monroe is “iconic” because she has what most people dream of: eternal youth. Egan has Jules compare Kitty to Monroe to highlight just how consumed American pop culture is with youth.

Egan juxtaposes the youthful Kitty with Jules, a heavy, middle-aged journalist with slight eczema. He has had a string of recent failures in his work as well as his relationship with Janet Green, his longtime girlfriend, now ex-fiancée. During their interview, it is clear that Jules is extraordinarily envious of everything that Kitty represents. He is jealous of her ignorance- that she is “unaware as yet that she will reach middle age and die” (Egan 180). He is envious of her flawless skin, meaning “nothing hangs or snags or snaps or wrinkles or ripples or bunches” (Egan 180). In this chapter, Jules often compares himself, unfairly, to Kitty. He puts her up on a

pedestal, commenting on how much more beautiful and desirable she is than most, but then is entirely self-deprecating.

Jules is representative of the way in which American culture tends to view youth and aging. Getting older is not seen as a good thing, markedly in the entertainment business. Typically, when people long for their youth it is because they feel as if they have not accomplished what they wanted to, and now it is too late. A strong desire to go back in time and have a “do-over” is common when people are regretful. He envies Kitty so much because “she has not yet disappointed herself” (Egan 180). Being so young, she has not had the chance to have any significant failures in her life like he has. She is simply a reminder of all that he has failed to achieve and of everything that has gone wrong in his life. Finally, he is envious of all the possibilities she has before her and all the time she has left to accomplish them. She has her whole life ahead of her, so to speak. That is why Jules so desperately longs to reach “the inner life of Kitty Jackson” (Egan 182). He wants to be successful, and he has inaccurately coupled success with being young.

The seemingly unexplained and unjustified violence he very suddenly feels towards Kitty is due to her youth and blissful ignorance. She is only nineteen at the time, and she is already more successful than he will ever be. At least, according to him, she is. “Her prattle about the challenging role and the trusting relationship she had with her director and what an honor it was to work opposite such a seasoned star as Tom Cruise is the bitter pill we both must swallow in exchange for the privilege of spending some collective time in Kitty’s company” (Egan 170). He is jealous of the enormous success she has already managed to attain. Jules truly does represent how Americans feel about growing older. “Oh, I’m too old to try that now, it would never work.” When did we ever decide what “too old” is and what it applies to? The entertainment industry

holds youth and beauty at a high standard. There are entire businesses and magazines dedicated to keeping people looking young, and in turn our society recognizes those as essentials for happiness and achievement.

The emergence of Hollywood coincided with the “gradual but essential shift in Americans’ experience of growing older” (Addison). The “cult of youth” celebrated young adulthood as the most privileged period of life. As previously stated, to American culture, aging is not typically seen as something to be celebrated. Yes, we celebrate birthdays and make an occasion out of them, but don’t we stop getting excited after a certain point? Anticipation is replaced by dread, and no one wants to be reminded that he is inching closer and closer to death. A great number of people, namely women, are willing to spend astronomical amounts of money on anti-aging creams or plastic surgeries in order to keep looking young and fresh faced. Our economy is targeting this fixation and businesses are preying on people’s desire to be young again. The Forever Young Broad Band Light (BBL) treatments from Body Enhancement Med Spa in Sioux City claim that “you CAN turn back the hands of time” (Hansen). Their miracle skin treatment has made people appear “nine years younger than their actual age” (Hansen). They ask the question, “What if you could slow down the aging process?” If that was possible, what person would not want to? Due to the emphasis placed on youth and beauty in Hollywood, people are more inclined to spend money they do not have on anti-aging treatments. James Verniere of the Boston Herald asserts that “Corporate America instantly co-opts youthful styles or trends and turns them into commerce before young people get to claim them as their own.”

Egan, however, does not have the same fascination with youth. She completely and utterly disagrees with the notion that only the young are happy. Through Jules’ success in his

ripened age, Egan shows that one does not need to be young to have a chance at being successful. She wants us to embrace getting older, and to do it with grace, dignity, and acceptance. Jules conveys the idea that one can achieve his goals and be prosperous later on in life. After he gets out of prison, he is motivated to find a job and resume the role of hard-hitting journalist. Although he is unable to find a job at first, he finds success when he tags along with his sister while she meets with one of her clients. The client is Bosco, an overweight, cancer-stricken guitarist from the once highly popular band the Conduits. He immediately hires Jules to document everything that happens on his planned Suicide Tour. He has exclusive media rights to cover the story and is the sole writer. Ironically, the tour helps Bosco recover, and he goes on to own a dairy farm. Jules writes a book about it titled, *Conduit: A Rock-and-Roll Suicide*. The use of pop culture and the entertainment industry helps illustrate one of Egan's main points: one does not need to be young in order to achieve something. Society is so incredibly obsessed with looking young, being young, and trying to reclaim youth once it has faded. Egan highlights the fact that success can come at any age, at any time, so long as a person works for it.

Alongside the obsession with the physicality of looking younger, our society tends to linger on memories and experiences, believing that our past is better than our present. We like to imagine a golden past, even if it really was not. "We live in a pop age gone loco for retro and crazy for commemoration, band re-formations, and reunion tours" (Fitzgerald). Remakes are made because they remind people of their youth- they do not have to necessarily enjoy the movie to go and see it. Bands that were popular years and years ago go on tour again. In the novel, Bosco is an example of that. He has been out of performing for quite some time but plans to make a comeback album and go on tour. Nostalgia keeps Egan's characters locked in the past and convinced that the best years of their life are gone. It hinders their ability to move forward

with their life. Rather than dwell on the past, Egan urges her audience to look towards the future and all that can still be accomplished. The main reason that a character is miserable at any time in the novel is because they are either trying to live in the past or are stuck comparing past experiences to what is happening in the present, which usually is not anything good. Egan uses the character of Alex in this way. In the final chapter, a good portion of his time is preoccupied with thinking about Sasha, who is actually a symbol for his past and the longing he has for his youth. Time has weathered him and wore him down; he yearns for the time when he had his whole life ahead of him, when he was twenty-four and new to the city. Alex is plagued with thinking about what could have been. He constantly tries to remember details about Sasha but comes up short. “She seemed to wink at him (green eyes?) and slip away” (Egan 325). Through his struggle to remember, Egan demonstrates how living in the past can be dangerous and distract us from what is important. He seems extremely unhappy with where he is in life, and that is because he is stuck in the past, not accepting that some things ended long ago. Egan uses the entertainment business as a vehicle to demonstrate how people are becoming more and more nostalgic.

The most prominent example that directly relates to this increasing trend is the character of Bennie Salazar. “Nostalgia is an epidemic, all about today’s generation wanting nothing more than to be a thing of the past” (Fitzgerald). Bennie is the embodiment of nostalgia and regret in the novel. When we first meet him in the second chapter, he wants nothing more than to go back in time and relive his past. While listening to old songs in his car, he thinks back to “the good old days,” the golden age of his teenage years. However, in the following chapter, Egan writes about the very time he was remembering so fondly, and shows just how “golden” it was not. Bennie misconstrues his own memories and only desires to return to that time because his life is not

fulfilling to him. Similar to Jules, he has a failed relationship with his now ex-wife Stephanie and has not been on top of his game career wise. It is only natural that Bennie should want to return to a time when things seemed to be going well. The use of a song provoking memories is very relatable to a vast audience. It is common for a specific song to be attached to a certain memory and evoke a wave of nostalgia. While there is nothing wrong with looking back on memories, Egan warns that it is unhealthy to try and live in the past, especially when it is used to escape the present.

“Nostalgia gets us all, sooner or later. It seems to be afflicting people at younger ages” (Nachman). Sadly, nostalgia is not just increasing among adults, but children and teenagers as well. In chapter eight, Kitty Jackson expresses her lust to be young again. “I want to be like Lulu- innocent” (Egan 152). Kitty is only twenty-eight; she has not had much life experience, but she is already longing for the past. Then in chapter nine, we see an even younger Kitty demonstrating some nostalgic thoughts. “Sometimes I imagine myself looking back on right now, and I think, like, where will I be standing when I look back? Will right now look like the beginning of a great life or... or what?” (Egan 175) Regret and indecision are prominent among the younger characters of the novel. For instance, Rhea is extremely unsure of every decision she makes and is usually left asking herself a “what if?” question. She is younger than Kitty, only sixteen or seventeen, yet she longs for a simpler time. A time when things were easier. At that age, things *are* easy. “Real life” has not started yet. All of her worries will seem insignificant as she gets older and has to find a job and has bills to pay, along with other adult responsibilities. At the end of the chapter, Rhea and Alice watch two little girls play tether ball in their uniforms. This is the simpler time that Rhea wants to return to, when the hardest decision was choosing what to wear for the day. Then in chapter four, Rolph, who is even younger than Rhea, exhibits

signs of early nostalgia. It is brief, and seemingly trivial, but it speaks volumes. While on vacation in Africa with his family, he urges his sister, Charlie, to remember the time that they vacationed in Hawaii. He wishes that they were on that vacation instead, nostalgic for the time that was spent there.

There is, however, hope. There are a few characters that come to realize that there is in fact potential success in the future. They are the most happy and seem to have their lives on track because they finally understand that there is so much to be valued with getting older. One example is that of Sasha. Her youth was really anything but golden. In fact, she had an extremely rough time growing up and discovering herself. Her father was never around; she became depressed, and then eventually ran away. Her uncle went looking for her, but did not have the right intentions. "He wanted nothing to do with her. She was lost" (Egan 214). Sasha is eventually able to find herself by the end of the novel. She has a family, comfortable and happy with where she is, *not* wanting to dwell in the past and relive her youth. Another example is the character of Rhea. In her youth she is very unsure of herself and generally displeased with the way life is going for her. It is not until we see her in the future that she is content with life and herself. She is married, has three children, and lives in Seattle. Egan has her promote the idea that it is never too late to get back on track and find success through the way she speaks to Jocelyn. Jocelyn is extremely regretful about "wasting" her youth and claims that it was all for no reason, for nothing, but that is not true. "You just haven't found the reason yet" (Egan 87). Rhea perpetuates the notion that working towards a goal in the future is much healthier and more beneficial than looking back on the past and being regretful.

A very important, reoccurring theme in the book is time and its relentless passage. Egan relates pop culture and youth to this theme to help illustrate how time stops for nothing and for

no one. The most popular band will go out of style; the biggest actor will get older; it is inevitable, yet time is often able to take people by surprise. People are completely aware that time passes and they get older every second, so it should not be shocking... Then why is it? We as a whole tend to distract ourselves from life with trivial things, such as pop culture, without even realizing it. It is a way to deny our own passage of time. People read tabloids, watch talk shows, and download the latest single from their favorite artist, interested in living other people's lives while their own is passing them by, not looking back. That "How did I get so old?" feeling creeps up one day, and somehow thirty years have passed by without anyone noticing. Even popular television shows today have picked up on this common occurrence. "It's the oldest story in the world. One day you're seventeen and planning for someday, and then quietly, without you ever really noticing, someday is today and that someday is yesterday and this is your life" (Nathan Scott, *One Tree Hill*). Egan's point is to not let there be room for regret or extreme nostalgia. Life is meant to be lived; it is not suddenly over after a certain age is reached. A person's youth is not the only time that they can accomplish their goals and achieve their dreams.

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