

## QUESTIONS ABOUT STRATEGIES

1. Why does Didion use “I” in most of the essay but switch to the third person in paragraph 4?
2. Where in the essay do you find Didion using her novelist’s skills of narration and description? What does she accomplish by those strategies?

*For Writing and Research*

1. *Analyze* the various examples Didion provides to define the word *migraine*.
2. *Practice* by defining a particular illness you have experienced.
3. *Argue* that it is difficult, if not impossible, to define one’s pain to someone else.
4. *Synthesize* the most recent research on treating migraine headaches. Then use this evidence to help readers cope with this illness.

## RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

Richard Rodriguez was born in San Francisco in 1944 and was educated at Stanford, Columbia, and the University of California at Berkeley. The son of Mexican immigrants and unable to speak English when he started school, he eventually went on to earn a master’s degree and was awarded a Fulbright fellowship to study English Renaissance literature at the Warburg Institute in London. His compelling and controversial autobiography, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982), provides details of Rodriguez’s experiences in the American educational system and his alienation from his own culture. His recent books include *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (1994), and *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (2002). In “Growing Up Old in Los Angeles” (reprinted from *U.S. News and World Report*, April 7, 1997), Rodriguez tries to define the idea of adolescence as it is acted out in southern California.

*Growing Up Old in Los Angeles*

AMERICA’S GREATEST CONTRIBUTION to the world of ideas is adolescence. European novels often begin with a first indelible memory—a golden poplar, or Mama standing in the kitchen. American novels begin at the moment of rebellion, the moment of appetite for distance, the moonless night Tom Sawyer pries open the back-bedroom window, shinnies down the drainpipe, drops to the ground, and runs.

America invented a space—a deferment, a patch of asphalt between childhood and adulthood, between the child’s ties

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to family and the adult's re-creation of family. Within this space, within this boredom, American teenagers are supposed to innovate, to improvise, to rebel, to turn around three times before they harden into adults.

If you want to see the broadcasting center, the trademark capital of adolescence, come to Los Angeles. The great post-war, postmodern, suburban city in Dolby sound was built by restless people who intended to give their kids an unending spring.

There are times in Los Angeles—our most American of American cities—when teenagers seem the oldest people around. Many seem barely children at all—they are tough and

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*The baby boom generation transformed youth into a lifestyle, a political manifesto, an aesthetic, a religion.*

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cynical as ancients, beyond laughter in a city that idolizes them. Their glance, when it meets ours, is unblinking.

At a wedding in Brentwood, I watch the 17-year-old daughter of my thrice-divorced friend give her mother away. The mother is dewey with liquid blush. The dry-eyed daughter has seen it all before.

I know children in Los Angeles who carry knives and guns because the walk to and from school is more dangerous than their teachers or parents realize. One teenager stays home to watch her younger sister, who is being pursued by a teenage stalker. The girls have not told their parents because they say they do not know how their parents would react.

Have adults become the innocents?

Adults live in fear of the young. It's a movie script, a boffo science-fiction thriller that has never been filmed but that might well star Jean-Claude Van Damme or Sylvester Stallone.

A friend of mine, a heavyweight amateur wrestler, wonders if it's safe for us to have dinner at a Venice Beach restaurant.

(There are, he says, 12-year-old gangsters who prowls the neighborhood with guns.)

Some of the richest people in town have figured out how to sell the idea of American adolescence to the world. The children with the most interesting dilemma are the children of 90210. What does adolescence mean when your father is a record producer who drives to work in a Jeep to audition rap groups? What do you do when your father—who has a drug habit and is nowhere around in the years when you are growing up—is an internationally recognizable 50-foot face on the movie screen?

On the other hand: What can it feel like to grow up a teenager in South Central when your mama is on crack and you are responsible for her five kids? Teenagers who never had reliable parents or knew intimacy are having babies. There are teenagers in East L.A. who (literally) spend their young lives searching for family—"blood"—in some gang that promises what they never had.

It is every teenager's dream to "get big." In L.A. you can be very big, indeed. Fame is a billboard along Sunset Boulevard. Mexican-American gangstas pass the Southern California night by writing crypto-nonsense on sides of buildings, because the biggest lesson they have taken from the city is that advertisement is existence. Los Angeles is a horizontal city of separate freeway exits, separate malls, suburb fleeing suburb. Parents keep moving their children away from what they suppose is the diseased inner city. But there is no possibility of a healthy suburb radiant from a corrupt center. *No man is an island entire of itself.* Didn't we learn that in high school?

The children of East L.A. live in the same city as Madonna and Harvard-educated screenwriters who use cocaine for inspiration, selling a believably tarnished vision of the world to children of the crack mothers in Compton.

And look: There's always a TV in the houses of Watts. And it is always on. In the suburbs, white kids watch black rappers on MTV. Suburbanites use TV to watch the mayhem of the inner city. But on the TV in the inner city, they watch the rest

of us. The bejeweled pimp in his gold BMW parodies the Beverly Hills matron on Rodeo Drive.

Elsewhere in America, we like to tell ourselves that Los Angeles is the exception. The truth is that, for all its eccentricity, Los Angeles tells us a great deal about adolescence in rural Kansas. And postmodern L.A. is linked to colonial Boston. Today's gangsta with a tattooed tear on his face is kin to young men fighting Old Man Europe's wars in the trenches of 1914 or 1941, to the young rebels who overthrew Old Man Englande rather than submit to another curfew, and to Judy Garland, who will always be a stagestruck teenager.

The earliest Americans imagined that they had fled the past—motherland, fatherland—and had come upon land that was without history or meaning. By implication, the earliest Americans imagined themselves adolescent, orphans. Their task was self-creation, without benefit or burden of family. The myth that we must each create our own meaning has passed down through American generations.

Young Meriwether Lewis heads out for the territory. He writes to his widowed mother, "I . . . hope therefore you will not suffer yourself to indulge any anxiety for my safety. . . ." The ellipsis is adolescence: estrangement, embarrassment, self-absorption, determination. The adolescent body plumps and furs, bleeds and craves to be known for itself. In some parts of the world, puberty is a secret, a shameful biological event, proof that you have inevitably joined the community of your gender. In America, puberty is the signal to rebel.

American teenagers invent their own tongue, meant to be indecipherable to adult hearing. Every generation of adolescents does it. Adults are left wondering what they mean: *Scrilla. Juking. Woop, woop, woop.*

"Children grow up too quickly," American parents sigh. And yet nothing troubles an American parent so much as the teenager who won't leave home.

Several times in this century, American teenagers have been obliged to leave home to fight overseas. Nineteen-year-old fathers vowed to their unborn children that never again would the youth of the world be wasted by the Potentates of Winter.

My generation, the baby boom generation, was the refoliation of the world. We were the children of mothers who learned how to drive, dyed their hair, used Maybelline, and decorated their houses for Christmas against the knowledge that winter holds sway in the world. Fathers, having returned from blackened theaters of war, used FHA loans to move into tract houses that had no genealogy. In such suburbs, our disillusioned parents intended to ensure their children's optimism.

Prolonged adolescence became the point of us—so much the point of me that I couldn't give it up. One night, in the 1950s, I watched Mary Martin, a middle-aged actress, play an enchanted boy so persuasively that her rendition of "I Won't Grow Up" nurtured my adolescent suspicions of anyone over the age of 30.

My generation became the first in human history (only hyperbole can suggest our prophetic sense of ourselves) that imagined we might never grow old.

Jill, a friend of mine whose fame was an orange bikini, whose face has fallen, whose breasts have fallen, whose hair is gray, is telling me about her son who has just gone to New York and has found there the most wonderful possibilities. My friend's eyes fill with tears. She fumbles in her handbag for the pack of cigarettes she had just sworn off.

What's wrong?

"Dammit," she says, "I'm a geezer."

From my generation arose a culture for which America has become notorious. We transformed youth into a lifestyle, a political manifesto, an aesthetic, a religion: My generation turned adolescence into a commodity that could be sold worldwide by 45-year-old executives at Nike or Warner Bros. To that extent, we control youth.

But is it unreasonable for a child to expect that Mick Jagger or Michael Jackson will grow up, thicken, settle, and slow—relinquish adolescence to a new generation?

At the Senior Ball, teenagers in the ballroom of the Beverly Hills Hotel, beautiful teenagers in black tie and gowns, try very hard not to look like teenagers. But on the other hand, it is very important not to look like one's parents.

The balancing trick of American adolescence is to stand in-between—neither to be a child nor an adult.

Where are you going to college?

The question intrudes on the ball like a gong from some great clock. It is midnight, Cinderella. Adolescence must come to an end. Life is governed by inevitabilities and consequences—a thought never communicated in America's rock-and-roll lyrics.

American storytellers do better with the beginning of the story than the conclusion. We do not know how to mark the end of adolescence. Mark Twain brings Huck Finn back to Missouri, to Hannibal, and forces his young hero to bend toward inevitability. But Huck yearns, forever, “to light out for the territory . . . because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it.”

And then comes the least convincing conclusion ever written in all of American literature: THE END, YOURS TRULY, HUCK FINN.

### *For Study and Discussion*

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT PURPOSE

1. Rodriguez projects an angry tone in this article. Toward whom do you think the anger is directed and what does he hope to accomplish by stirring up anger with his readers?
2. What new information or insights about American adolescents did you get from this essay? What do you think Rodriguez wants you to do with that information?

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT AUDIENCE

1. This article was originally published in *U.S. News and World Report*, a magazine whose readers are generally well educated, fairly prosperous, and in their late thirties or forties. How do you think they view most adolescents, and what might they learn from Rodriguez that could help them with their own children?
2. What different experiences and attitudes about adolescents do readers under thirty bring to this essay? How do you think their experiences affect their response to the essay?

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT STRATEGIES

1. Probably most of Rodriguez's readers haven't been to Los Angeles. What details does he use to convey the flavor of that city to a stranger? How well do they work to help you envision Los Angeles?
2. Rodriguez uses exaggeration as a strategy. For example, he says that Los Angeles is the most American of cities, he compares a pimp in his gold BMW to a Beverly Hills matron, and he mentions Madonna and the mothers of crack babies in the same sentence. What effects does he achieve with this strategy? How effective do you find it?

### *For Writing and Research*

1. *Analyze* the way Rodriguez uses analogies to define “adolescence.”
2. *Practice* by defining the characteristics of “adulthood.”
3. *Argue* that American popular culture has turned adolescence into a commercial product.
4. *Synthesize* the way various storytellers have dealt with the theme of adolescence. Then use this evidence to argue that these writers have trouble portraying adult characters.