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Fraught with Fear: A Cultural Inquiry into Midlife Crisis, Life Course Pessimism, and Identity in Justine Triet's *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023)

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Abstract: Life course pessimism and age anxiety are considered pertinent matters for an age cohort that was previously categorized as older adults; however, the proliferation of such pessimism has now become rampant, extending to an age cohort that is considerably younger than fifty. The objective of this paper is to analyse the cultural representation of the midlife crisis in Justine Triet's *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023) through an examination of Samuel Maleski's character and the ways in which his traits shape his identity. The study aims to explore the mechanisms and underlying reasons through which the transition into midlife triggers age-related anxiety and pessimism regarding the life course. The researcher draws on one of the central frameworks in age studies proposed by Margaret Morganroth Gullette, examining whether the protagonist's midlife crisis is shaped by factors associated with "perilous parenting" (Gullette, 2004). In addition, the study incorporates David Gutmann's (1971) framework of ego mastery to explore the psychological dimensions of the character's struggle in adapting to the developmental shifts associated with midlife.

Keywords: *Midlife Crisis, Life Course Pessimism, Gullette, Age Anxiety*

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Introduction

Narratives of aging in the Western societies have long been shaped by a powerful discourse of decline, one that frames aging as a process of “inescapable decline” (Gullette, 30) and a gradual descent toward death rather than a period of maturation, change, and personal history. These extensive decline-oriented narratives perpetuated and amplified within capitalist structures have extended their influence far beyond populations traditionally categorized as ‘older adults’. Consequently, the cultural framing of aging as inevitable decline extends across all age groups, structuring expectations throughout the life course. The intensification of these age-based norms has generated significant psychological distress. Empirical evidence suggests that individuals who perceive themselves as falling short of socially prescribed milestones frequently internalize feelings of inadequacy, construing themselves as behind or deficient relative to their peers (Zhou et al., 2025). Additionally, the reflective appraisal, wherein a person measures their self-worth by how others evaluate them, is highly influential than their own expectations and is linked to depressive symptoms for young adults (Cullatta & Warner, 2021). This perceived inability to conform to normative life trajectories contributes to age-related anxiety and a pessimistic view of the life course, not as direct consequences of biological aging but as reactions to socially constructed expectations. In this way, decline narratives function as a regulatory force, reinforcing economic and social systems by encouraging individuals to define their value through productivity, material accumulation, and the timely achievement of prescribed milestones.

Cultural representations of the life course have consistently favoured emerging adulthood as a stage of vitality, productivity, and resilient optimism (Arnett 2015). Conversely, later life is frequently framed through a discourse of decline, marked by assumptions of diminishing relevance, capacity, and social visibility, portraying it as “a downward slide toward decrepitude and morality” (Simpson et al, 12). Situated between these two heavily codified stages, midlife emerges as an ambiguous and often precarious stage. Notwithstanding its centrality within the life trajectory, midlife remains an unmarked category in both scholarly inquiry and cultural analysis (Gullette, 2004). More often than not, midlife issues are enclaved as personal and natural, thereby trivialising this life stage and obscuring the broader structural, cultural, and socio-economic forces that shape it (Gullette 2004). Additionally, it is most commonly invoked through the reductive phrase ‘midlife crisis’, a term that presumes instability, dissatisfaction, and existential rupture as defining features of the life stage. For this reason, it becomes imperative to investigate why midlife continues to be associated with crisis, what constitutes these crises, whether they are culturally and socially constructed, or if they represent an ambiguous state of identity flux. By undertaking midlife as a life stage associated with crisis resulting in age anxiety and

pessimism, this paper formulates its central thesis that midlife crisis is culturally induced and constructed.

Life stages and their transition into each stage are more vividly experienced when they are visually orchestrated. A best example of this is the face aging simulations in the museums and its modern alternative in the form of mobile applications such as *Face App*, which allows users to see projected images of themselves at different life stages. These applications make aging appear more tangible by providing a visual representation of how an individual might change over time. However, the images they generate remain superficial because they are disconnected from personal history and lived experience. In doing so, they reduce the self to a purely visual body, where identity is confined to outward appearance. This process contributes to what Gullette describes as “identity tripping,” a narrative centered on “losing what we had” (Gullette, 130), reinforcing the idea that aging is primarily a story of decline rather than continuity or transformation.

In a broader context, movies offer a nuanced and thoughtful representation of different stages of life and the transitions between them. As both a visual and narrative medium, cinema does more than present isolated life stages; it also explores the changes, tensions, and uncertainties that shape these transitions from one stage to another. In doing so, films deepen viewers’ understanding of personal history and lived experience (Halverson, 2010). This representation is conveyed through cinematic techniques such as contrasting color palettes, costume design, spatial dynamics, and visual metaphors. These elements work together to create a richer emotional and psychological understanding of character development (Monteverdi, 2024). Additionally, the careful combination of visual elements allows cinema to move beyond simply presenting events in chronological order and instead create a vivid sense of life unfolding across different stages. On a global level, Hollywood cinema has frequently explored different stages of the life course in varied ways. Films such as *Boyhood* (2014), shot over twelve years, follow Mason Evans Jr. from childhood to adolescence, allowing his growth to unfold gradually and in real time. In contrast, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) challenges conventional ideas of aging by presenting a character who ages in reverse, drawing attention to the close relationship between time and the body. While these films make aging visible through gradual physical change and character development, *The Substance* (2024) offers a far more disturbing portrayal of transition. In this film, bodily transformation is shown in graphic and unsettling ways, highlighting the instability that arises when a character attempts to return to an earlier stage of life. Through techniques such as close-up shots, handheld camera movement, and selective focus, the film emphasizes the character’s inner experience and emotional transformation. In this way, cinema establishes narrative depth by presenting embodied sensation through formal images and causal sequences (Wilson 2020).

Departing from life-course narratives structured around transition and development, a number of films isolate a single life stage as their primary thematic concern. These narratives typically centre on one protagonist, allowing for an in-depth exploration of their characteristics, conflicts, and embodied experiences that define that specific period of life. Movies like *The Father* (2020), concentrate on later life and the emotional and physical turmoil of a person living with dementia. Similarly, the French production *Amour* (2012), features an older couple grappling with the aftermath of a sudden stroke, which disrupts the equilibrium of their long standing relationship and redefines their experience of later life. Movies centered on later life have a tendency to depict older characters as marked by pessimism and a diminished will to live. Nevertheless, crisis driven disillusionment and existential despair appear even more prominently in cinematic representation of midlife; a life stage that is distant from later life. This contrast suggests two possible presuppositions. First, midlife, often framed as a period of crisis, may profoundly shape the subsequent transition into later life, carrying forward unresolved anxieties and internalised pessimism. Second, the anticipation of an inevitable decline may induce a form of pessimism already embedded within earlier stages of adulthood, rather than emerging solely in later life.

Discourse on men in crisis, especially in the movies, garnered significant attention with the cinematic direction of Alexander Payne. In his movies, Payne “collectively examine the disorientation and disappointments of midlife men”, often revealing “how ideologies of iconic White manhood weigh on individuals who fall outside of—or age out of—those masculine ideals” (Levinson, 301). Midlife in his films are often triggered by career stagnation as seen in *About Schmidt* (2002) and *Election* (1999), resulting in loss of identity built solely on their career. Although midlife men are widely represented in cinema, relatively few films offer a sustained introspective examination of how these characters perceive themselves, how they rationalise the circumstances leading to their crisis, and how such self-understandings affect those around them. It is in this context that necessitates the present study, as the film *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023) knits together the cause, the effect and the cascading consequences that affect these men and the ones around them. Directed by Justine Triet, and starred by Samuel Theis, the movie *Anatomy of a Fall* portend a precipitous shift by centering its entire plot around a seemingly dramatic fall of a male character, dovetailing the concept of midlife crisis, existential exhaustion, and a growing pessimism toward the life course as inscribed in masculine identity. Without disregarding the conflicting issues of age- expected achievements as a capitalist manifestation that leads to anxiety and pressure to meet particular life-stage expectations, the movie shifts its focus toward the psychological consequences of this crisis, examining how such pessimism reshapes and destabilises male identity.

The film provides a striking cinematic case through which the transformation of midlife into crisis can be examined. Although the narrative formally centers on Sandra Voyter, who is tried for the alleged murder of her husband, Samuel Maleski, the film gradually establishes Samuel as a powerful

and lingering presence whose struggles reflect broader concerns about age, success, and self-worth. A novelist whose career has stalled, financially dependent on his more successful wife, and burdened by guilt over his son's accident, Samuel embodies the strain created by professional disappointment, fragile masculinity, and family tension. The film's use of space and visual symbolism intensifies the conflict between the characters and hints at Samuel's psychological decline. Despite the frequent portrayal of midlife and its associated crisis in cinema, relatively little scholarly attention has been given to how a midlife crisis affects personal identity. This paper therefore examines the cultural representation of the midlife crisis in *Anatomy of a Fall* through the character of Samuel Maleski, exploring how his circumstances illustrate a sense of life-course pessimism and how this shapes his identity. In particular, the study asks whether Samuel's crisis can be explained primarily through what Gullette terms "perilous parenting" (31), referring to heightened anxieties around child-rearing and generational responsibility, or whether his situation extends beyond this framework to include wider social, economic, and gender pressures. By placing Samuel within contemporary expectations surrounding achievement, masculinity, and creative work, this paper argues that his midlife crisis contrives from a combination of generational pressure, professional displacement, and the weakening of traditional masculine authority.

This paper draws on age studies, focusing primarily on Gullette's critique of decline narratives, while also engaging cultural discussions of masculinity and contemporary ideals of productivity. It also considers Gutmann's concept of ego mastery to better understand Samuel Maleski's character and his struggle to maintain a sense of control, competence, and authority in midlife. Through close analysis of selected scenes, dialogue, and cinematic techniques, the film is examined as a portrayal of midlife marked by uncertainty and vulnerability. By situating Samuel within generational expectations and family responsibilities, the study extends Gullette's idea of "perilous parenting" to include wider social and cultural pressures that shape age-related anxiety. The paper argues that Samuel's crisis is not only a personal unraveling but also reflects broader cultural tensions. His midlife experience is shaped by comparison, professional displacement, and an internalized sense of failure influenced by shifting standards of success. Through this character, *Anatomy of a Fall* questions why midlife is often associated with decline and loss of relevance, suggesting that anxiety about aging now begins much earlier than old age. In this way, the film provides a meaningful context for reconsidering Gullette's theories in a twenty-first-century setting where concerns about aging increasingly affect individuals at what is meant to be the midpoint of life rather than its end.

Deconstructing Midlife and the Crisis Narratives

The idea of midlife as a clearly defined stage remains widely debated and often misunderstood in cultural discourse. Traditionally placed between the ages of forty and sixty, with some flexibility on either side (Infurna, 2020), midlife has increasingly become a fluid and less clearly bounded category. Its supposed psychological and social effects are now frequently attributed to individuals as young as thirty. This premature bracketing of the self into a stage historically associated with decline generates anticipatory anxiety far earlier than biological or experiential markers would warrant. As a result, feelings of anxiety and uncertainty may arise prematurely, encouraging identification with narratives of stagnation and crisis rather than with possibilities for growth or change. In this way, the shifting boundaries of midlife contribute to the continued reinforcement of cultural narratives of decline.. For this reason, it is pertinent to trace the cultural construction of this life stage and to deconstruct it.

Lachman and James (1997) identify Carl Jung and Eric Erikson as the pioneers who contributed the most renowned theories of midlife. For Jung, midlife is distant from early and later adulthood, whereas Erickson (1968) contends that the psychological conflict in midlife is primarily attributed to an inward fixation with a generativity vs stagnation dyad. However, despite its significance, Gutmann's (1971) contribution to the study of midlife has been largely overlooked, although his work offers a valuable framework for understanding the psychological shifts and reorientations that characterize this stage of life. His work on the stages of 'ego mastery' challenges "the prevailing assumption concerning middle and later life-- that true psychological development ends with physical maturation, and that the individual coasts through the rest of his life, acting out the traumas and acting on the capacities that are the residues of the early development years" (237). Ego mastery, according to Gutmann, refers to "a particular way of relating to the self and to the world, to a particular way of understanding the world, and to a particular way of creating, defining and solving problems" (238). Among the three stages of ego mastery identified by Gutmann, midlife is most closely associated with autoplasic, or passive, mastery. Midlife is often described as a psychological turning point. In earlier adulthood, individuals tend to practice what Gutmann calls alloplastic or active mastery, seeking independence, achievement, and influence in the external world. During midlife, however, attention gradually shifts inward toward self-regulation and reflection. Instead of trying to control circumstances, the individual begins to adjust to them. Martin and Prosen (1972) argue that this movement from outward ambition to inward adjustment can itself give rise to a midlife crisis, as it requires letting go of a strongly achievement-oriented identity. They further note that the outcome depends largely on how a person responds to this change, since one's way of handling these concerns determines whether the crisis leads to renewed growth and usefulness or to stagnation and resentment (Martin and Prosen, 88). This line of inquiry raises a set of pertinent questions, such as whether Samuel fails to make the psychological transition into autoplasic mastery that Gutmann associates

with midlife; whether he remains entrenched in an alloplastic mode, continuing to assert, compete, and impose himself upon the world in ways characteristic of youthful ambition; and whether his midlife crisis emerges from a resistance to accommodation—an inability to reconcile himself to altered expectations, diminished authority, and the constraints of lived reality.

While Gutmann's framework helps us understand midlife as a psychological reorientation from outward mastery to inward accommodation, it still operates within a developmental paradigm that treats midlife as a structured life stage. A more contemporary intervention is offered by Margaret Morganroth Gullette, who shifts the focus from psychological transition to cultural narrative. For Gullette, midlife crisis is not simply a developmental turning point but a product of decline discourse embedded within modern age ideology. It is within this framework that this paper intends to situate Samuel's Malenski's midlife identity and its crisis.

At the core of Gullette study (1997; 2004) lies a literary and sociological analysis of the processes through which biological ageing is culturally constructed as a narrative of personal and social decline. Such an alternative line of inquiry becomes particularly important, as in the western culture, Hepworth (2003) argues, continues to frame human ageing primarily through a biomedical lens, one that is synonymous to a reductionist model of decline. Gullette, in proposing an alternative understanding of decline, does not deny that ageing involves biological change. Rather, she emphasizes the implications of relying solely on a biomedical model and draws attention to the social and personal consequences of interpreting biological change as 'decline'. In doing so, she highlights how these meanings are culturally constructed and reinforced through discourse. Gullette's emphasis on the middle years as a stage marked by overlooked and accumulating anxieties makes her work particularly valuable for understanding midlife. By tracing how these tensions build from earlier life stages and shape the individual's sense of self, her framework offers an important lens through which to examine how midlife crises are culturally produced and experienced.

Midlife Crisis and the Fear of Failure: Color Palette, Spatial Dynamics and Sonic- Visual Metaphors

In her work *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife* (1997), Gullette conceptualises midlife as a cultural fiction that has been given an ontological status within the society. She critiques the cultural forces that shape our understanding of middle years as a period of inevitable decay and offers a framework rooted in social constructionism, focusing on how language, cultural scripts, and institutional forces generate anxieties around midlife particularly through ageism and gendered stereotypes. Gullette (1997) argues that when decline narratives are repeated in media, families and institutions, they become the mental equipment that individuals use to interpret their own life events and, consequently these repeated stories form virtual realities that dictate a person's

willingness or reluctance to grow older. Such a tendency to interpret one's own self worth based on virtual realities induces what popularly known as midlife crisis.

In the opening scene of the movie, we see Sandra Voyer, a middle-aged woman writer giving an interview about her books, engaging with the interviewer in a fun way asking about her interests rather than indulging in a conversation about her successful career. This presumably gives the introduction about the jovial writer Voyer, who had to stop the interview before it even began as her husband Samuel Maleski was blasting music on the speaker upstairs. This scene implicitly introduces the character of Maleski, who is threatened by his wife's success as a writer and tries to disrupt her interview by creating tension in the household by playing loud music and imposing his presence without showing himself. By playing an instrumental version of a popular misogynistic song called *Pimp* (Fifty Cent, 2003), that serves as a sonic metaphor, he tries to assert and regain his presumably lost masculine self. This scene holds the essence of midlife where one's characteristic is either generativity as in Sandra or stagnation as in Maleski (Erickson 2020).

The couple are in their midlife, however the crisis associated with midlife only haunts Maleski as he feels threatened and diminished as he is not able to adhere to the masculine characteristics expected out of him at that age, which are constructed by the society. There exists a stark contrast between the Malenski who is aging into the midlife and the Maleski who is in the emerging adulthood. From the visual imageries present in the movies in the form of videos and photos, we get a glimpse of a young Maleski with such vigour, ambition, enthusiasm and the will to live on his terms. Sandra remembers young Maleski as a charismatic man who is also a successful teacher. She says "when he walked into a room something shifted.. the atmosphere changed, and I suppose it is charm, isn't it? and I fell in love with his charm" (47:57-48:05). Even though he was successful at his job as a teacher at the time, he tied his identity solely to that of a writer. Sandra recollects that unlike her, he had a complicated relationship with time and work and she says "he was working on a novel for years, I watched him struggle and it was hard (49:23-49:28). Malenski's transition into the midlife; into an autoplasic Passive mastery triggered the crisis as his ego was still in an Alloplastic active mastery (Gutman 1971) where his characteristics "to achieve, to 'leave one's mark', to be independent in action and choice, are strongly desired" (Martin and Prosen, 67). Since Maleski had a complicated relationship with time, as mentioned by Sandra, his inability to be a writer in alloplastic active mastery compelled him to restrain from aging into midlife.

Maleski frays with the fear of failure and can be seen as a victim of believing in the decline narratives of ageing. In her essay titled "Perilous Parenting: The Deaths of Children and the Fear of Aging-into-the Midlife", Gullette elucidate how contemporary literature uses the deaths of children as a "lightning rod" (64) to represent adult anxieties about aging, decline, and the perceived loss of control in midlife. The figure of the child is used as a proxy or as an objective correlative for the adult

protagonist's vulnerabilities. Gullette contends that by killing off a child, here in the case of Maleski, by creating a visual impairment in his child and by almost killing him, the writer creates a virtual reality that asks the audience: "Can I survive the worst that life can shove at me?" and, "Is time on my side or against me" ? (70). Malenski believes that time was against him and he correlates his failure as a writer with his son's visual impairment. Another pertinent trope central to midlife parenting, according to Gullette is "the high responsibility, low control" recipe that leads to excessive psychic strain. The core instability that Malenski encounters on a daily basis is the guilt of his son's accident that permanently damaged his optic nerve, making him visually impaired. The fatal accident of his son Daniel Maleski at the age of four marks as a crucial moment in this movie that adheres to the narratives of decline as it reinforces the idea that parents are "always already responsible" for their children's safety, even in cases of pure accident (Gullette 63). This argument is further strengthened when Sandra confirms that the accident shifted Maleski's life trajectory as "he became obsessive about it, blamed himself on loop... perhaps he never truly escaped from that feeling" (51:04-51:14). Additionally, Gullette posits that such a fatality is maintained to obscure other adult fears such as economic instability, career stagnation, and a sense of personal decline.

The spaces mostly inhabited by the couple in the movie shows a stark difference between the two couples and their take on midlife. The contrasting color palette employed in the movie where Sandra's room is filled with books and painted in burgundy symbolizes passion, ambition and strength whereas Maleski always ties himself to the attic, devoid of color symbolizing an unavoidable hollowness. This illustrates that Sandra perceives midlife as a period of growth, maturation and self-reflection, offering a positive narrative of midlife aging and as for Maleski it is a period of heightened self-scrutiny and perceived inadequacy.

Life Course Pessimism, Identity Stripping and the Ultimate Fall

Life course pessimism, as described by Gullette (1997), refers to the belief that one's best years have already passed and that the future holds only decline or loss. In Maleski's case, he sees his most promising years as wasted and believes he has failed to use them in the way he once hoped. He was once a respected university teacher in London who inspired both colleagues and students. However, his ambition to become a writer was disrupted by his son's accident and the events that followed. The accident, which occurred while he was responsible for his son, left him with lasting guilt and reduced the time and emotional energy he could devote to writing. As he took on greater responsibility at home, including homeschooling his son while his wife continued to write and publish, he began to resent what he saw as lost time and fading creative ability. Although the couple shared parental duties, his growing fear of professional failure led him to assume more responsibility and, eventually, to blame his wife for her success.

Sandra's admission of infidelity further damaged his sense of masculinity and personal worth. By locating his distress mainly within the family, the narrative risks presenting aging itself as the cause of his crisis, rather than acknowledging wider social and professional pressures. Maleski comes to see himself as unsuccessful in multiple roles: as a writer, a father, and a partner. This belief is further strengthened when Sandra calls him out for his proclivity to fall for a decline narrative. She says "You complain about a life that you chose. You are not a victim. Not at all. Your generosity conceals something dirtier and meaner. You're incapable of facing your ambitions and you resent me for it, but I'm not the one who put you where you are. I had nothing to do with it! You are not sacrificing yourself as you say. You choose to sit on the sidelines because you are afraid! Your pride makes your head explode before you can even come up with a germ of an idea! You wake up and you are forty, needing someone to blame. You are the one to blame! You are petrified by your own fucking standards and your fear of failure! This is the truth" (1:36:12-1:36:52) This perception deepens his pessimism, especially as his desire to establish himself as a writer remains unfulfilled.

Although he continues to hold meaningful identities as a teacher, father, and husband, these aspects of his life are overshadowed by his sense of failure. When such pessimism is reinforced by cultural messages about decline and achievement, it can lead to what Gullette calls "identity stripping" (129), where a complex individual is reduced to the image of an aging and unsuccessful man. Maleski experiences a profound narrowing of identity, becoming fixated on his unrealized ambition to be recognized as a writer. This singular preoccupation prevents him from acknowledging and valuing his other meaningful roles as a father, teacher, and partner. Caught in a cycle of frustration and self-blame, he measures his worth solely against his failed literary aspirations. As this sense of inadequacy deepens, it erodes his broader sense of self, contributing to his psychological collapse and suicide—the ultimate fall.

Conclusion

This study of *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023) highlights how midlife and the so-called midlife crisis are shaped by personal experience but by powerful cultural narratives. By examining decline discourse and the idea of perilous parenting, the paper shows that both Sandra and Samuel confront the same family tragedy—their son's accident—yet respond to it in fundamentally different ways. Sandra approaches midlife as a period of continued growth, self-examination, and professional commitment. Samuel, however, interprets the same circumstances through a narrative of decline, allowing fear of failure and anxiety about age-related expectations to define his identity. The contrast between them suggests that midlife crisis is not an inevitable psychological stage but a response shaped by social expectations. Samuel's distress emerges less from aging itself and more from internalizing cultural standards of success, masculinity, and timely achievement. His fixation on his unrealized ambition as a writer prevents him from valuing his other roles as a father, teacher, and partner. In this way, his crisis reflects

a culturally produced form of life-course pessimism rather than a purely personal weakness. Ultimately, the film presents midlife as a site of possibility as well as vulnerability. Through the differing trajectories of Sandra and Samuel, *Anatomy of a Fall* demonstrates that midlife can either be experienced as a stage of adaptation and renewal or as one of decline, depending on how individuals respond to cultural scripts. The study therefore argues that the midlife crisis, as portrayed in the film, is not a natural outcome of aging but a socially constructed condition shaped by contemporary pressures and expectations.

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