



# Growing Up Absurd

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## **Growing Up Absurd** Paul Goodman

Growing Up Absurd analyses the causes & effects of: "the disgrace of the Organised System, of semi-monopolies, government, advertisers etc. & the disaffection of the growing generation". Goodman asserts that the young really need a more worthwhile world in order to grow up at all, confronting this real need with the world that they've been getting.

## **Growing Up Absurd Details**

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Author : Paul Goodman

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# From Reader Review Growing Up Absurd for online ebook

## Andrew says

On the whole, the argument is annoyingly reactionary, but Goodman makes a number of critical points about the repressive nature of mass culture in America. Despite the, at the core of it, weirdly conservative origins, there was enough truth and valid commentary to keep me wrapped up, and indeed entertained over the course of the book.

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## Dan Gorman says

This was a weird one. Goodman was an anarchist, a Ph.D. in the humanities, openly bisexual in a sexually Puritanical culture, and a self-taught renegade psychologist. In this book, published in 1960, Goodman argues that juvenile delinquents deserve sympathy and support, but not pity. The urban kids who join gangs in a desperate attempt to survive; the sad young office drones trapped in the corporate "rat race"; the Angry Young Men of Great Britain; the Beat artists who are alienated from mass culture, leave the rat race, and choose to slum it among the poor — all of these youths grasp that the corporate-liberal social order is stale. It grinds people down. The schools don't foster creativity or independence, only the rat race, and those kids who don't conform are shunned or labeled delinquent. Meanwhile, the promises of political liberalism go unfulfilled, income inequality swells, and the big TV networks (remember, this is 1960) churn out monotonous programming instead of real art.

Goodman expresses his desire for politicians who fulfill liberalism and redirect resources to help the needy, but he does not spell out how such programs would work. He is not a big-state Marxist. If anything, Goodman, like James Agee, is an individual-minded Marxist. Goodman's ideal state would give money to teachers but reduce guidelines, so that teachers can get on with teaching, instead of dealing with bureaucracy. He does not spell out what should happen in such classrooms to foster independence. Similarly, Goodman wants the networks to stop producing TV and only distribute independent artists' work, but he does not explain how this revamped market would operate. In my reading, Goodman prefers highlighting moral problems and needs to spelling out policy.

This lack of concrete solutions, along with Goodman's surprisingly overt sexism, is disappointing. I do think Goodman is onto something when he challenges parents to attack corporate and political b.s., teach their kids to value idealistic politics, and give their kids independence, instead of policing kids' every move. Goodman makes an incisive claim that urban gangs don't want to be outcasts, but rather they want to belong and survive at all cost. The passages on income inequality, particularly how inequality affects minority populations in cities, and what would be called white flight in later years are spot-on. The critique of the networks is timely, given the FCC's looming attack on net neutrality. Like any iconic primary document from a past decade, "Growing Up Absurd" is partly stuck in its own time, and partly relevant to the present day (for me, December 2017). Goodman was *sui generis*.

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## Chad says

Even though it was written over 50 years ago, it still feels like there are topics that maintain relevance today

with today's youth. A worthwhile read for anyone trying to piece together the lack of progress in American society and education in developing it's young boys into proper men. This book offers the reader a set of patterns from the history that we still have not fully overcome as a collective and may well help to properly inform from where modern society has developed.

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### **Andrew Dolbeare says**

Goodman was a brilliant thinker and this is a very insightful book. It great on several levels, to the in depth analysis of The Beat Generation to the social criticism about the career culture that still persists today. If you can look beyond the sexism, which is a problem, you'll absolutely take something from this book. Susan Sontag, in her essay on Goodman addresses this and her reasons for forgiving it. I think ultimately despite being so forward looking he was ultimately still man very much locked in his age and the sensibilities of that age and I think that his legacy has paid something for that.

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### **Nicholas During says**

I found this book to be very powerful. In it, Goodman lays out his argument explaining youth delinquency as a direct product of society's "organized" control of the individual's life. Rather than rejecting society, however, Goodman thinks that really the juvenile delinquent is calling out for inclusion. The destruction, violence, unconventional behavior is really a call for attention and demand to be included in society and given valuable opportunities. Goodman then goes on to list the problems of society, the main ones being work that is not useful, meaningful, or in any way appealing to its workers, no real opportunities to be heard or work how one wants, various levels of status anxiety, and many other such flaws. All of which is pretty convincing to me. And Goodman is not just the traditional critic/rebel of society, he really has unique things to say and he aims to solve big problems, not simply going after issues prevalent at the time. He is not a Marxist attacking capitalism and a government that helps it and its beneficiaries (though he kind of its), he is in the old of a traditional reformer going after the problems in modern society, the media and pop culture being strong examples of this.

The problem, as most people have noticed who read the book today, is that Goodman explicitly only addresses young men. He admits to thinking the problem is with them, because women at the last resort always having meaningful work and purpose, giving birth. More than this Goodman's critique often comes out as "Kids these days aren't allowed to grow up to be men," either because of the jobs they take, opportunities given, etc. Reading this nowadays is laughable, and I tended to ignore these parts and assume his reforms are meant for, and will help, all people. But still it does give the entire argument an undertone that makes one wince.

The other thing that should be said about Goodman is his writing. I have rarely read a political/sociology/cultural book like this that has so much passion and force. Goodman is not so interested in analyzing current society, though he is, as fixing it. He's not so concerned with consistency and accuracy and making a difference. And in reading his prose one could never doubt he means it. Susan Sontag says similar in her little afterword. Goodman is far from a cynic, in fact he sees cynicism as a major flaw in modern society, and a connection between the "hipsters" and the "organized men" who keep society working

in their office jobs and role in the "rat race."

There is a real problem with this book, sexism, and many of Goodman's reforms seem impossible to implement, some would come up with serious freedom of speech issues, other may be having too much faith in basic human nature and the desire for individuality, nonetheless I really enjoyed this book, think it is still relevant despite a few issues, and is worth a read for anyone interested in OWS, political reform, revolutions and radicalism, group psychology, or merely a history of politics in the 60s.

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### **William P says**

This book, originally published in 1960, became a "bible" of the Counterculture and the New Left. It stands precisely at the crossroads of the "conformist" 50s and the "rebellious" 60s. Basically, Goodman was commissioned to write a study of "juvenile delinquency," and used it as an occasion for indicting American society's failure to provide anything better for youth to grow up into. He essentially sided with the disaffected youth, telling them they were right, the society was morally and culturally bankrupt. His term for the new form of American life in the 50s is "the organized system." His critique of its failure to provide meaningful activity, some compelling role for young people to grow into, also serve him as a framework for interpreting the Beat movement -- on p. 114 of the edition I read, in a chapter titled "Social Animal," he says, "where now there are thousands of these young men, there will be hundreds of thousands. [The next sentence is italicized.] The organized system is the breeding ground of a Beat Generation." It is a great book, prescient in 1960 and yet still relevant today. The New York Review of Books edition I read also has a preface by Casey Blake and an afterword by Susan Sontag, both marvelous. Interestingly, both Blake and Sontag take Goodman to task for his sexism, but are both perfectly serene about forgiving him for it, because in other respects they find his thought so compelling. It is a blind spot, and not a minor one, but somehow they find the fact that he just does not seem to be taking women into account at all easy to set aside, I suppose because they both feel his argument is equally applicable to women. But it bears thinking about, because the Beat movement has a misogynist side, and it is not clear that the Counterculture on the whole -- free love, anti-war, Civil Rights -- was always committed to feminism -- though of course what was at the time called the Women's Movement was part of it, too. Anyway, this is an important book everyone living in the United States should peruse at some point in his/her life, both because of its vast influence, and because Paul Goodman's perspective is still valuable today.

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### **Christopher McQuain says**

Goodman's seriousness and energy still sparkle from underneath the book's layers of anachronism, some of which go all the way to the bone (the most egregious example is the consistent use of the word "manly" as a lazy-even-for-then, reactionary-now synonym for multiple human potentials and positives that have little or nothing to do with gender-- the book was written in the late '50s and published in 1960). Extra 1/2 for good context by Casey Nelson Blake and Susan Sontag.

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### **Erik Graff says**

This book was a big deal by the time I entered high school, but I only got around to it while visiting an older friend in Chicago during the senior year. I read his copy while staying at his apartment and wasn't much

impressed as Goodman seemed to be stating the obvious with a rather condescending attitude.

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### **Petter Nordal says**

Goodman was writing about juvenile delinquency in 1959. His argument boils down to the idea that American society has become so weird and organized, that stupid and futile rejection of the ready-made options that young people have is only a reasonable reaction. All this was written when the Beats were delinquents, yeah, the Beat Generation.

This makes for fun reading. First of all, it is a time capsule, where you have to try to remember what was going on in America in 1959, an interesting exercise in itself.

Secondly, it is bizarre by today's standards, to imagine a book that sees Allen Ginsburg as a ridiculous example of the rejection of American culture and an example of how boys do not have the opportunity to grow into men anymore, not to mention, the idea of writing a book about education which concerns itself about white boys and not really anyone else as the inheritors of American society.

Thirdly, this book serves as an awesome antidote to all those people who say that everything worked well in the olden days; because Goodman argues that things worked better when schools had a limited impact on society and society was less organized and less classed; and because this was more than half a century ago.

Finally, it is awesome to see how many of his arguments were prescient and can be applied to those who reject schools today.

A lot of fun.

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### **Katie says**

I never read the artist's aim so clearly (and, in my mind, accurately) stated:

"All men are creative but few are artists. Art making requires a peculiar psychotic disposition. Let me formulate the artistic disposition as follows: it is reacting with one's ideal to the flaw in oneself and in the world, and somehow making that reaction formation solid enough in the medium so that it indeed becomes an improved bit of real world for others. This is an unusual combination of psychological machinery and talents, and those who, having it, go on to appoint themselves to such a thankless vocation, are rarer still." (p. 160, new nyrb edition)

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### **Nils says**

Arguably the pivotal text from "the 1950s" to "the Sixties," Goodman's book is the ultimate reasoned rant against the painful consequences of the postwar repressive society of what he intentionally reifies as "the Organized System" of "the Man." He takes the Beats as both symptomatic of what's wrong with the system, and possessed of some seeds of future healthier social alternatives. As Nelson's new introduction points out, it is of a piece with other radical critiques that remain rooted in hope for premodern virtues (one thinks of Kit

Lasch): it would be a mistake to think of this book as reactionary, but it's certainly true that Goodman's ideal world appears to be the *Gemeinschaft* of the early modern village, stripped of its sexual repressions and social rigidities.

First, in certain respects it remains shockingly timely, in its explanation of the way that society's strictures produce the alienation that leads to juvenile delinquencies. He realizes that it is the foreclosure of the American small town virtues of "manly" labor that leads those who do not have access to the top of the income scale to engage in antisocial behavior. He detects, very rightly, that the anomie of the delinquent and the cynicism of the salaryman are in fact not all that dissimilar and in fact spring out of the same social dynamics created by mindless consumerism and jobs that do not involve the production of anything tangibly useful. One sees easily why this became a bible of the New Left's critique of the repressively desublimating society.

Second, in other respects, it is shockingly dated, above all in its treatment of women, who he breezily suggests should be totally satisfied with just making babies. He writes, for example, of how women may themselves become Beats: "Perhaps they have left an unlucky marriage, have had an illegitimate child, have fallen in love with a Negro, and found little support or charity 'in' society. They might then choose a life among those more tolerant and find meaning in it by posing for them or typing their manuscripts." Ouch: pre-Betty Friedan this most certainly is!

Third, in its treatment of sexual repression it is both shockingly frank and weirdly of its Neo-Freudian moment. He speaks directly to the sexual desires and activities of the young, both homosexual and heterosexual, in a very matter of a fact way. He takes sexual desire to be a basic part of the human experience, not something to be apologized for. And he says with absolute clarity that sexual repression does far more aggregate psychological damage than any untoward sexual misadventures will do. In this sense, his sensibility is already post-sexual revolution.

Finally, there are moments when it all three at once. For example, consider his "precise, if annoying, illustration" of how young men the world over need to establish their manliness by earning a decent living: "In countries where it is not too antipathetic to the mores, young fellows will engage in homosexual activity; but they might ask for a few pennies, enough to buy five cigarettes. This sum is not the wages of prostitution; such a thought would outrage them, for if they did not enjoy what they are doing they would not do it. It is, rather, a way of making the act legitimate, justified, not merely pleasure. The money serves exactly the same symbolic function as the wedding ring for a young woman. Earning some money affirms the young man is a man." (183-4) Whoa!

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## **Chrisl says**

Probably the first personally significant non-fiction book I read. Goodman's question, "What's worth doing?" paired with Mother's philosophy, "Lifelong, put more in the pot than you take out," and tri-podded with "Where you live will be more important than the income work you do."

Star 5 for being a lifelong, rooting, decision making associate. Not a book I'd be willing to reread, but a signpost always remembered.

Here be some quotes copied from a Kirkus Review:

"It is a tribute to ... Paul Goodman's impressive verbal facility that he is capable of expanding into a book a theme which could be dealt with sufficiently in an essay of not inordinate length.

"The thesis of *Growing Up Absurd* ... that there is a disaffection for modern society on the part of the young because our organized system -- its conformity, its irrelevant competitiveness, its role-playing, its avoidance of risk, its phony culture, its public-relations attitude, its basic meaninglessness -- ... in short, the things our society honors are not worth growing up to.

"He deals mainly with the problems of young men ... He divides young men into two great groups: the Bright Young Men wasted in the Rat Race; and the bright young men unused and thwarted as Independents. Then there are the Problems: the Early Resigned (among whom he places the Beat Generation) who are qualified but who have quit the game; and the Early Fatalistic, the underprivileged who will never have a chance. He discusses the plight of these groups in a job market where there is very little serious man's work; in a class structure that is becoming more rigid; in a physical and social environment that has grown out of human scale; and in an atmosphere that generally does not encourage and certainly doesn't reward, the concept of Service.

" ... in spite of the pessimistic tone of the book, Goodman is encouraged and heartened by the expression of ""fraternity, animality and sexuality"" he sees in delinquent behavior, the Beat and the Angry Young Men. ..."

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## **Fergus says**

Back when we were 16, my friend Ian and I realized we were surrounded by rhinoceroses.

We had sneaked a copy of a book by Eugene Ionesco backstage at the opening night of our high school variety show. I don't know if they heard us laughing uproariously in the front row of the audience, but we really didn't care. For we had discovered the Absurd.

Ian later went on to become a mainly unemployed artist, who passed away in a road accident several years ago - still struggling mightily against conformity. I went on to a steady, pensionable career after graduation, having embraced the Catholic religion. The difference between us? I had found hope. Ian had found "resistance, rebellion and death." I remembered him not long afterwards in a memorial Mass.

You can't fight the rhinoceroses of conformity by embracing the Absurd. Those rhinoceroses wear heavy body armour, and we don't. On our road to a wider, more pervasive and inclusive humanity, if we don't have ultimate and transcendent hope, we may not make it to our journey's end.

Paul Goodman wrote this symptomatic classic in 1960, and it is still valid - though it's now a vapid, well-worn theme. Alienation is a part of our lives. Transcend it, or be buried by it. But alienation happens only to the moral remnant of humanity - the audience Christ preached to!

And you know, nowadays when my wife and I walk through our familiar neighbourhood, we no longer see the old, familiar rhinoceroses. No - they have been replaced by beautiful, fallible, wounded human beings like the rest of us.



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### **Ralph Römer says**

This is truly a brilliant book! Paul Goodman is one of the most original thinkers I have ever encountered. I recommend this book to anyone who struggles with the repressiveness of the Organized Society we live in.

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### **The Laurax says**

He has some interesting and possibly good ideas on many things; how to approach the problem of juvenile delinquency, how to keep kids from growing up afraid of their own sexuality, how to keep workers feeling fulfilled in their jobs, how to attack poverty without attacking the poor. The writing is sometimes beautiful, there are several quotes that stuck out to me. Other times the wording comes out pompous, and Goodman makes a point to apologize for coming off as angry or aggressive in the writing. I also can't get over that almost immediately when you start this book, Goodman tells you the problems he is writing about pertain to men specifically. He doesn't seem to think it's possible for women to want fulfillment in the same way, because, as he says, women get all the fulfillment they need by having children. \*Face palm\*

So yeah, 3/5 for being sexist but also trying to give it some credit for the ideas and writing style.

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### **Jesse Cohn says**

Parts of this are still compelling -- and still apply! -- but other bits are really marred by Goodman's major blind spot, his sexism. Nonetheless -- as an interpretation of why America is such a weird, sad, difficult place to grow up, sometimes, despite all the good things we have going for us, this is worth reading.

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### **Sunny says**

This is a book that helped galvanize a lot of the 60s youth movement in the states and probably galvanized a lot of other people around the world also. Goodman essentially talks about how to try to solve the problem of youth as it was in use 60s. I thought this was excellent and tied into some of the things skinner had written in walden 2. The books talks about class structure, the aptitude of youth, use of leisure, capitalism, growing up of course, society, the labour market, city lifer vs country life, the responsible man, the rat race. It's marginally sexist in places and I don't agree with goodman views on sexual stuff but I have to admit this is one of the best books I have read in a while. "The organisation butts in everywhere, and sets the high style of how things are done. It dominates big enterprise, politics, popular culture and it's influence is moulding enough to man the future with a new generation of dependent and conformist young men without high aims and with little sense of natural or moral community." wow.

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### **Shafiq Razak Rajan says**

Paul Goodman is a "disappointed, but not resigned Angry Middle-Age Man" (as he himself admits) who critiques the organized system of living that is damaging to everyone in it, be it those copywriters who have offices in Madison Avenue, those Beatniks who frequented jazz bars listening to Miles Davis, or the juvenile delinquents who stole Cadillacs for one hell of a joyride. Despite their different stations in life, they are all united in being the victims of a damaging system of life that impede authentic human growth.

Remember that this book is written during the 1950s. Therefore, one who is not thoroughly familiar with the cultural scene of America in those days (like myself) might have trouble in understanding his examples. Being a Malaysian in the early 21st century, however, I can relate to some of the points illustrated by Goodman.

In Malaysia, the Bumiputeras (a rough equivalent of WASPs in America, but that's debatable, of course) have been given ample political and economic opportunities as a result of government policies, especially after the 1969 riots. Some of them managed to study overseas under government sponsorship, come back to work in cushy jobs in the government or multinational Government-Linked Companies (think Sime Darby), settled in a comfortably suburban life in Shah Alam, Ampang, Bangi and eventually producing offsprings that will continue this cycle of success (thanks largely to ample social, cultural and economic capital attained by their parents).

With the rise of the Malay middle class, there are those who are left behind in the 'rat race'. Those are the Malays that lacks the necessary capitals to win scholarships or business grants, the rural Indians who eventually inhabited the city slums, the migrant workers who now form the backbone of the proletariat, the ever-neglected Orang Asli (the aborigines) and other marginal groups not favored by the official policy, or simply ignored/oppressed due to blatant corruption.

Like 1950s America, Malaysia's economic growth indeed increases the standard of living for many of its citizens, but at the cost of solidifying structural imbalances. Those who benefit, possibly a majority of the people, will defend this structure. While those who are marginalized loses more and more of their bargaining power. In the end, those who benefit sees no reason to change anything, while those are marginalized simply loses the power to imagine a better life. Everyone belief that the current system is a divinely ordained, instead of an objective reality changeable through human agency.

For Goodman, the losers here are not only those who live in the fringe of the society. Even those who 'make it' suffered in doing mundane, unimportant jobs for the sake of high salary. Those 'Organization Man' becomes cynical and resigned. He finds solace in consumption of material goods, not in enjoying his job or doing something worthwhile in his spare time.

Again, returning to the Malaysian example, these executives play golfs with their bosses not because they enjoy it, but to play the role sycophants for career advancement. Also, contracts are signed without proper tender, and everyone, from the department director to the lowly clerks, seem resigned and cynical about it all. In short, men are separated from their worthwhile vocation, and whose main purpose of life is to accumulate more wealth for the sake of consumption. No longer we do a job and be proud of it.

Goodman's America and my Malaysia might be separated in space and time, but I notice similarities in the direction both those countries are (or were) heading. We live in times of peace and prosperity, albeit with increasing subtle marginalization that solidifies the status quo. And sadly men become objects, not subjects, of history.

Goodman's remedies are so simple that critics are shocked by his seeming naivety. He called for the return to

old traditional values such as Honesty, Honor, Shame, Patriotism and the reinstatement of the communal spirit. Cities should be built in a way that is friendly for interaction between its citizens. Schools should be swarmed by earnest professionals who are not resigned in the face of it all. And education should be liberal, instead of streamlined to give importance to Science subjects.

In the same way, Malaysia could do better with the return to the old 'kampung' (village) spirit that shaped the Malays way of life, instead of this half-baked urbanization that drives Malaysians to crazed consumerism. And words like 'Sahsiah' (personality), 'Jati Diri' (integrity), 'Maruah' (Honor) should be given a deeper respect, instead of being meaningless slogans in government letters, typed down by cynical personnel.

What is needed is a complete revolution in our way of life. And please, as Goodman himself insists, no more half-baked revolutions (as in the case of most revolutions in human history), for an unfinished revolution is more damaging than a failed one. Because, a failed revolution signals that something is not achieved and there are still more work to do. However, an unfinished revolution promotes the sense that everything that ought to be has been, and nothing more could be done.

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### **M.L. Rio says**

Goodman had some interesting quasi-anarchist political ideas, but his anecdotal/speculative approach leaves a lot to be desired, and the pervasive patronizing misogyny is appalling even by last century's standards.

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### **Jesse says**

Even in the late 90s/early 00s this book helped me make sense of my relation to (and at odds with) the larger world. I wanted to give this book to everyone I cared about, and copied long passages of it out in a notebook so that I could better remember the things I had learned. A tremendous book.

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