

**Gates:
Hindrances of Progress and the Trauma Experienced by Tassie Keltjin
in *A Gate at the Stairs***

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To believe that the events on September 11 only traumatically affected those within New York or Washington D.C. is a logical presumption. After all, the citizens of these cities witnessed the destruction first hand, and believed themselves to be in an area of additional danger. The amount of valuable businesses and organizations present within these two cities makes them prime targets for future attacks, so people were, and still are, looking over their shoulders out of fear of another attack. Yet, the targets at which the terrorists aimed are necessary for the well-being of several countries. Thus, an attack on these cities is an attack on the world. Therefore, fear and anxiety were prevalent in the hearts of people thousands of miles away.

The way Lorrie Moore presents Tassie in her novel *A Gate at the Stairs* is as a fictional mirror to the adolescents at the time of the terrorist attacks. Tassie struggles to find a voice and is soft spoken when her opinions are called for. She becomes awkwardly silent when her decisions and sentiments are needed most. Her decisions are often ignorant and put others in harm's way. Tassie has a lot on her mind, and the majority of the novel is her thought process and morbid way of thinking.

Writing Tassie as an adolescent, and having the story take place just months after the events on September 11, allows Lorrie Moore to justify her presentation of Tassie in a way that shows that Tassie is undergoing trauma. She is unconsciously anxious and her social skills prove this. The novel illustrates the struggles of "finding a voice" and growing up in an adolescent's life. It also reveals the effects of 9/11 have added additional hindrances on an adolescent's

development, namely Tassie's. The addition of fear and trauma on a developing human's life greatly alters Tassie's development. The multitude of changes in Tassie's life, including psychological change in America post 9/11, has greatly affected Tassie in a way that makes it more difficult to express her feelings and causes her to perform irresponsible actions.

A Gate at the Stairs takes place just months after the events of 9/11, thus, the emotions, thoughts, and fears are still fresh in everyone's minds. In the beginning of the novel, the impression the reader receives of Tassie is one of a quasi-typical adolescent, she's a twenty something looking for a job. However, as the novel continues, the readers is able to pick up on Tassie's strange way of perceiving the world stating instances of morbid reality such as when she states her ideas of what happened to all the birds as they flew south (Moore 3). The readers continuously witness more and more of Tassie's input, though not through vocal expression, but rather through inner monologue, showing that she would rather internalize her opinions rather than express them to others for fear of judgment. As the story continues, Tassie lands a job which requires her to nanny a family's adopted daughter. Issues arise revolving around the little girl, Mary Emma, as she is a mixed child. Tassie, therefore, is presented with a lot of opportunities to voice her opinion, for Mary Emma is under her care primarily, yet she remains silent. Her only source of emotional refuge has been her brother, Robert, with whom she can discuss anything.

After Tassie and the adoption agency find out that Mary Emma's parents have been hiding some major secrets of their past, Mary Emma is taken out of their care and Tassie never sees her again. This emotionally taxes Tassie and adds to the anxiety she is facing. She loses all interest in school and returns home for the summer in a daze.

During the summer her brother joins the military and is killed. Dumbstruck by this, Tassie no longer voices any opinions, and takes to thinking that Robert's death is her fault. The funeral provides the readers with a sense of Tassie's anguish as she crawls into Robert's casket to say goodbye. The reader never really sees Tassie fully recover, but after months of recuperation, the readers are able to see that Tassie is becoming more and more comfortable with herself and able to voice her opinions.

The feelings Tassie is going through in the book *A Gate at the Stairs* relate to the feelings experienced by several after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. This includes people farther than just mere blocks from Ground Zero. The events of 9/11 have affected everyone, and have placed an extra dose of fear in everyone's life. The adolescents growing up during 9/11 had to deal were arguably the most affected demographic with the exception of those in direct relation to the victims of the terrorist attacks.

At that time, these were the people who were trying to figure out who they were, what they wanted to be, and how they were going to be what they wanted. They were the ones dealing with new and complex emotions; the last thing they needed was an instillation of fear to upset their norms and emotions, and to follow them for the rest of their lives. Nancy Eisenberg and Roxane Cohen Silver state in their article "Growing Up in the Shadow of Terrorism : Youth in America After 9/11:"

Most of the children and adolescents who lived in the United States during the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (9/11) have grown up in the shadow of societal changes that followed or coincided with the reality of terrorism on U.S. soil. The 9/11 attacks ushered in a number of restrictions to travel and civil liberties, changes to political discourse, and two wars... Many commentators

noted the enthusiasm[over the death of Osama Bin Laden]vocally expressed by young people relative to other demographic groups, perhaps an acknowledgment of the degree to which their lives uniquely had been altered by the 9/11 attacks.

(468)

This shows the psychological effect the attacks had on younger viewers. When the mastermind behind the attacks had been thwarted, the adolescents of the time rejoiced due to the idea that the instigator behind their fear had been destroyed.

Tassie's attitudes at the beginning of the novel are not uncommon for someone in her position. The novel arguably starts out as a "coming of age" novel. She just moved to a big town from a small one and is experiencing symptoms of adjustment disorder. The symptoms often include feelings of uncomfortable seclusion and anxiety ("Adjustment Disorder"). Therefore, her issues stem from a lack of connectivity towards anyone else. She speaks of her roommate often, yet her roommate is not around. Thus, her only source of human connection is no longer present. Consequently, her feelings of loneliness are not unfitting.

However as the story progresses, the readers are presented with instances in which Tassie's behavior goes beyond adjustment disorder. Thus, the troubles which Tassie experiences can be medically traced. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), Tassie shows several signs of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. In addition, her moving to Troy at a time that was so emotionally taxing could have possibly had a hand in the PTSD which she experiences. Adjustment Disorder encompasses many of the same criteria as PTSD including sadness, hopelessness, and anxiety ("Adjustment Disorder"). The life change Tassie experiences by moving to Troy caused her to experience Adjustment Disorder. Her lack of conversation initiation, and her morbid thoughts, such as "I wondered about them [the birds]

all the time: imagining them dead, in stunning heaps in some killing cornfield outside of town, or dropped from the sky in twos and threes for miles along the Illinois state line,” illustrate what is on Tassie’s mind (Moore 3). Furthermore, the severe nature of these thoughts show the reader Tassie’s austere level of distress. The fact that the events of September 11 happened right after she made this life changing transition provides evidence that her anxiety and fear intensified. The DSM-5 states that the symptoms of PTSD usually begin to occur within the first three months of the trauma (“Posttraumatic Stress Disorder”). Thus, the quote Tassie makes about the birds offers the reader multiple viewpoints into Tassie’s mind. Dr. Aliko Varvogli, author of “Home, Land, Security: Lorrie Moore’s *A Gate at the Stairs* as a 9/11 Novel,” views the quote as a parallel to the horrendous acts of suicide during the 11th of September (184). However, this can be taken one step further as many suffering from PTSD often find ways to relive the event to which their stress can be attributed. Children, while playing, often relive the events through games or by drawing. In Tassie’s case, this vision of where the birds had gone was her reliving the events of that fateful day in American history. Eisenberg and Silver state that people miles away, even across the Atlantic, experienced symptoms of PTSD just by watching the events on television (469).

Tassie foreshadows in a similar way the story in which Sarah tells Tassie about their son who was killed in a car accident. This novel is written in first person, but in hindsight. Therefore, Tassie is able to play with words throughout the novel in order to allow for certain literary devices. Thus, her comment, “I passed a squirrel that had been hit by a car. Its soft, scarlet guts spilled out of its mouth... and the wind gently blew the fur of its tail, as if it were still alive” (Moore 24). Varvogli, again, takes this as an instance of foreshadowing the events in Tassie’s life, but, again, it can be taken further (185). Tassie realizes, in hindsight, the morbid

reality of Sarah and Edward's past. No matter how hard they tried to forget, the past was still alive, "blowing in the wind". To hear a story like this, especially when dealing with severe anxiety, is harmful to a human. The way Tassie recalls the tale with such vivid detail allows the reader to believe that this tale had quite an impact on her mind. When Tassie relays the story to the reader, she is able to describe Sarah/Susan's feelings as if they were her own. She describes a ringing in Susan's head, "a wheezing screaming without body or noise," in a way that allows the reader to empathize (Moore 241). Unless Sarah told her every minute detail—which, for a person who has spent her time trying to forget the event, seems improbable—this story had to have weighed on Tassie's mind profusely, thus, adding another source of stress to Tassie's harrowing life.

In addition to the previously mentioned symptoms, other symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder the DSM-5 lists include issues in relationships with parents, lovers, siblings and peers; issues in social functioning and school behavior; and the inability to experience positive emotions ("Posttraumatic Stress Disorder"). Furthermore, the DSM-5 states that those suffering from PTSD often experience "cognitions about the cause or consequences of the traumatic event(s) that lead the individual to blame himself/herself" ("Posttraumatic Stress Disorder").

All of these symptoms are found in Tassie. She does not seem to admire her mother and the reader gets a sense of this when Tassie first talks about her mother describing her as "the only Jewish woman that would feel comfortable leaving her young child alone," (Moore 9). The way Tassie first introduces her mother is unflattering to say the least. Yet, the reader sees her mother being a caring and concerned woman. The example presented early on of Tassie's mother's concern for her daughter's well-being is when she keeps pressing Tassie for answers concerning her new job (Moore 52). This contrast in what the reader sees versus what Tassie sees provides

evidence that suggests that Tassie may have feel disconnected from her mother. This disconnection between Tassie and her mother suggests that Tassie feels isolated from any woman that can relate to her during this stressful time in her life. That is why she takes a premature liking to Sarah so early in their relationship. Her mother does not understand her, and her roommate is scarcely around, so she unconsciously desires female companionship.

The original impression Tassie receives from Sarah is one of a down to earth woman. The interview that introduces the readers to Sarah presents a down to earth woman (Moore 10-24) However, after finding multiple skeletons within Sarah's closet, Tassie finds that Sarah is no better than those whom she criticizes. Just as Sarah states that she did not look at Tassie's resume, Tassie's impression of Sarah was only skin deep (Moore 176). Tassie's desire for companionship and guidance that she was hoping to find in Sarah never surfaces to anything but hearthache.

Furthermore, the massive amounts of pressure and the lack of guidance Tassie is experiencing contribute to several instances in which Tassie becomes detached from her environment. Tassie's issues at school during the final part of the novel, for example, can be attributed to the trauma she is undergoing (DSM-5). The first instance the readers see of Tassie's apathy and lethargy at school is her list of classes for the spring semester. Classes such as "Intro to Wine Tasting," "Intro to Sufism," and "Dating Rocks" do not manifest into a typical major (50). Her lack of dedication towards school implies that there is something bigger going on in her life that takes her away from daily routines. Her focus on school dwindles even more after Mary-Emma is taken from the Thornwood-Brinks. She stops studying and even going to her classes, "I failed my Neutral Pelvis final. I simply forgot to go" (262). Her apathy towards

her simple classes adds to the notion that she is simply caught up with internal issues that keep her from focusing on the present.

The reader never sees Tassie recover from her trauma and stress. In fact, the readers see her problems worsen, not just with the removal of Mary-Emma or the breakup with Reynaldo, but with the disturbing and unexpected death of her brother, Robert. Not only is she severely grief stricken, she also blames herself, additional symptoms of PTSD (DSM-5 “Posttraumatic Stress Disorder”). When Tassie describes her grief and states that she wishes that she would have answered the email a sense of guilt is present in the text, guilt that suggests that Tassie feels like it is her fault that Robert went off to join the army, thus killing him (Moore 307-8). Tassie’s act of crawling into her brother’s casket and laying with him is beyond what is considered socially acceptable. However, the immense toll on her mind that the event has caused Tassie provides the reader with a reasonable explanation for her actions; she is so traumatized by what has happened that she is not in her right mind. The DSM-5 states that acting outside of social norms is common in those suffering Posttraumatic Stress (“Posttraumatic Stress Disorder”) In addition, the references to the dead that she makes throughout the novel help to establish the argument that she has not been in her right mind the entire novel.

The trauma discussed is the reason why Tassie is unable to communicate thoroughly throughout the novel. The reader knows Tassie is full of opinions and insight just by reading the several asides and internal thoughts throughout the book. Yet, although Tassie has the highest word count in the novel, very seldom are the words spoken; most of the time they are just thoughts. Due to the severity of the last few months of 2001, Tassie has developed a sense of anxiety. She is unable to experience positive emotions. Very rarely does Tassie smile in the book, and when she does it is usually fake or for Mary-Emma, her only true source of comfort.

This idea that Tassie is unable to experience positive emotions not only shows signs of PTSD (DSM-5), but also is mirrored in the beginning of the novel by Tassie's parents "farming out of a magazine article," and her mother using mirrors to make her flower beds seem fuller (Moore 20). Varvogli believes, "These metaphors suggest the inauthentic, and imply that the trope of America's innocent farming heartland is itself a trick played with mirrors, sustained by reproducing stock images and clichés" (183). Varvogli's quote can be aimed directly at Tassie; she can put on a mask and put up mirrors to seem more positive, but it only goes skin deep. As stated earlier, she has too much distress to worry about school, family, and even social skills, thus the mask she puts on is shallow and uninspired. She acts in a way in which she can barely get by, but holds a large amount of pain, fear, and sadness inside. Her short inputs and "sounds great" phrases are used to show that she is present in a situation, but not entirely focused on the task at hand. Rather, the reader gets a sense of what Tassie knows to be troubling her through her many sleepless nights, such as the ones after her break-up with Reynaldo (Moore 213). Not only does this imply a broken heart, it also establishes many other feelings Tassie is experiencing.

The feeling of loneliness in the midst of others suggests her noticing her symptoms of trauma. When she states, "Not one person asked me about Reynaldo, which made me realized just how private and isolated our affair had been," the reader senses the loneliness she feels (Moore 214). Tassie writes, "My own emotions felt a disgrace," allowing the readers of the book to understand that she is insecure and has low self-esteem (Moore 214). Lois Tyson expresses in her book *Using Critical Theory: How to Read and Write About Literature* that low self-esteem often alters a person's personality if undealt with, and can change the way one expresses their feelings (86). If this theory is used on Tassie it shows that her low self-esteem

has caused her to bottle up her feelings and keep them hidden. The disconnect she feels from the rest of the world has caused her to underestimate her worth. In addition, the low view of self-worth makes her feel as if no one would care to hear her feelings expressed.

Even though the argument can be made that Tassie was depressed over the break-up, her distress from 9/11 may have had a hand in some of the issues she was currently dealing with during the time in which she is writing. Tod Mijanovich and Beth C. Weitzman, authors of the article “Disaster in Context: The Effects of 9/11 on Youth Distant from the Attacks” provide evidence of distress from adolescents after 9/11. They explain in their article that “youth in the Fall and Spring semesters of 1998–1999 had statistically indistinguishable levels of worry at bedtime, but youth who were interviewed in 2001–2002, especially in the 3 months after 9/11, were significantly more likely to be worried at bedtime than they were in either semester of 1998–1999” (Mijanovich & Weitzman 605). This suggests that the effects of September 11, 2001 altered the youths’ thoughts and kept them up worrying at night. Further, according to Mijanovich and Weitzman, the worries the youth focused on did not necessarily have to deal with the events of September 11. Rather, the trauma they were experiencing from that day amplified their current anxieties. Therefore, Tassie’s anxiety at the time quite possibly stemmed from the distress she experienced in the days following 9/11.

Tyson continues and says that if left untreated, people experiencing a core issue such as low self-esteem will often put themselves or others in dangerous and self-destructive situations. Tassie not only puts herself in danger several times, such as when she drives her scooter 60 miles from Troy to Dellacross in a storm (283-5), but also puts Mary-Emma’s safety in danger several times, as when she reveals “I began to find back routes to Reynaldo’s... If I took alleys, past the flowering bushes and the refuse and recycling bins, I could travel unseen, with Mary-Emma.”

(177). Although Tassie's actions were uncalled for and irresponsible, these actions sprout from the combination of distress from the 9/11 terrorist attacks and her feelings of inferiority. Seeing herself as unimportant and inferior, Tassie is able to justify her reckless acts, even if unconsciously.

Tassie's idea of her inferiority is better exemplified through her Google search of herself. She finds an old woman with the same name and takes an interest in her life (Moore 124). Throughout the book, Tassie tells the readers that she looked up this woman every so often and kept up with her life. The fact that Tassie feels unworthy prompts this fixation with the old woman. Tassie needs something to be interested in. This fascination with the much older Tassie is a technique Moore uses in order to demonstrate Tassie's disconnection with herself while still holding a human connection with someone she can relate to even vaguely. Tassie justifies her disconnection with who she is by being connected to another Tassie Keltjin.

This is still very unhealthy. Tassie is repressing her own thoughts and feelings, and trying to absorb another person's. The defenses, such as the denial and avoidance of issues which Tassie experiences, can later evolve into core issues (Tyson 83-6). Thus, by denying and avoiding her problems, Tassie is no longer able to accept and express her own opinions. In turn, this causes her trouble with expressing her feelings when experiencing loss and sadness.

When the old woman Tassie has been, more or less, cyber-stalking dies, it symbolizes Tassie's need to move on and accept herself, the situations which have been causing her grief, and the people around her. Moore presents this change excellently by having Tassie gradually go through this process. It takes Tassie some time to transition into being herself—she still clings to the recent past, demonstrated by her trying to get a job at Le Petit Moulin—but she eventually shows that she is ready to move on and find her voice (277). She loses the “okey-

dokey” mode, of which she is so partial, and is able to make her own decisions, exemplified when she hangs up on Edward on the final page of the novel (321). By the end of the book, she is still experiencing sadness brought on by the death of her brother, and the events of 9/11, but she has gradually made the transition to deal with those problems and find her voice.

Moore’s decision of not showing the reader a complete happy ending, gives the readers a greater sense of Tassie’s recovery. Posttraumatic stress does not disappear; rather, it stays with a person for the rest of their lives. A person’s ability to cope with the trauma however, becomes stronger and one is able to eventually move on with their lives and become a functioning member of society.

A Gate at the Stairs is a novel about a girl growing up at a very vulnerable time. The idea that she grew up in a place that she feels is disconnected from the rest of the world keeps her from seeing herself as anything but an outsider. Her analogy stating that going to college after coming from Dellacross is like emerging “from a cave” shows her feelings of isolation and distance from the rest of the world. Varvogli states, “Her mocking analogy implies rural America is sheltered from the realities of the outside world, sustained by its own mythologies” (182). Thus, she is unable to see how she fits in with the rest of the world, and begins to feel inferior to it. She does not matter, her opinions and fears surrounding 9/11 do not matter, and, therefore, she represses them—Tassie only talks directly about 9/11 once—causing the multiple and self-destructive issues to arise (5). Moore’s gradual transformation of Tassie presents a realistic approach of constant healing: one never truly gets over such traumatic events; they just learn to deal with them.

Subsequently, this novel is different than a typical “coming of age” novel. The readers never truly see Tassie’s transformation come to full fruition, which suggests that her transition is

ever forming, and that her voice will become more and more prominent until she is able to speak her mind and deal with the imminent struggles one faces throughout life. Therefore, Moore offers a realistic approach to a person's "coming of age" in a way that suggests that maturity and "coming of age" never ends. Rather, it is always occurring.

In this way, Tassie is presented as a model for all adolescents growing up in the early 2000's. The amount of changes and stressors already present in their lives mixed with the terrors that manifested during 9/11 presented these young adults with added challenges throughout the rest of their lives. The generations before could remember what life was like before 9/11, but the people transitioning to adulthood during the beginning of the 21st century not only had to witness the horrors of domestic terrorism but also the several precautions and imminent threat that followed. Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs* breaks ground by offering a scenario of one of the most troubled generations in America.

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