

Even 9/11's Our Fault: Millennials and 9/11 Influences

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The generational divide has been an ongoing debate for, well, generations. Older generations and younger generations disagreeing on the state of the world is a major topic of debate and has been analyzed in several cultural mediums. The latest victims of scrutiny are those known as the “millennials”. Millennials are typically characterized as lazy, technology obsessed, narcissistic and more. Yet one overlooked aspect that differentiates the adolescence of millennial individuals from adolescents of the past is the fact that they are the first to grow up in a post 9/11 world. In the novel A Gate at the Stairs by Lorrie Moore, the main character, Tassie, is a college student in the time period directly following this terrorist attack. Tassie exhibits several of the characteristics typically used to describe millennials. From her lack of direction in life to her fascination with emerging technology, Tassie seems, for all purposes, to be the picture of adolescence. This novel shows how the negative traits exhibited in adolescents were made more prevalent by the stress caused by the 9/11 attacks, with often catastrophic consequences to both individuals and the millennial generation.

The novel A Gate at the Stairs features a typical young adult woman named Tassie Kjeltin. She is twenty years old and is a college student in a medium sized Wisconsin town, based on Madison. She does not seem to have a typical direction in life, but she is in need of a job, so she interviews for several nanny jobs. She eventually is contacted by a woman named Sarah Brink, who needs a nanny for a child she is adopting. Through this process, Tassie comes of age, learning that her actions, and by extension, her tendency towards inaction, have consequences for others and that her lack of ability to connect to others actually lead to her losing them.

Many of the attributes that Tassie exhibits are attributes that have combined to give millennials a rather bad reputation. However, if we look more closely at how these attributes have developed in millennials in comparison to how adolescents have developed in general throughout history, it is not a stretch to imply that the traumatic nature 9/11 had on the United States and its citizens has affected how the millennial generation has developed. For example, looking at the state of the nation after the attacks, according to a 2002 study cited in “Coping and Anxiety in College Students After the September 11th Terrorist Attacks”, 5.8% of individuals not present in New York for the attack had developed PTSD- like symptoms. Additionally, in a study of college students after the attacks, 83% were “severely” certain that the country was headed for war. The most common coping mechanisms that these students cited in dealing with these attacks were “denial, behavioral disengagement [and] mental disengagement” (Liverant, Hofmann and Litz 136). These behaviors directly relate to the stereotype of adolescents as disengaged, unfeeling or apathetic. Tassie exhibits all of these “symptoms” throughout the novel. Since Tassie regularly chooses to not confront her emotions, particularly about strong emotions, it makes sense that this tendency would only get worse after such a brutal attack.

Since these coping skills are not in place, particularly in times of stress, adolescents often cope in unhealthy ways. Developmentally, at this age individuals are not able to think through all of the consequences of their actions. This has been well documented in Childhood Development and Education. According to theories on adolescent brain development, there is a delicate stage of the adolescent brain that encourages risky behavior. “Circuits in the brain devoted to enjoying immediate rewards mature before other circuits for avoiding adverse consequences” (McDevitt and Ormrod 159). There are many examples of impulsive action in A Gate at the Stairs. For example, Gunny joins the military because he is unsure of what else to do with his future. It was

already mentioned how this relates to his adolescent lack of direction, but it is even more dangerous when you combine this panic with a lack of forward thinking. In Gunny's case, he does not really research or even think about what being in the military will be like. He makes a split second decision that eventually ends his life. This was encouraged by the recruiters, since we see in the novel how quickly he is shipped out after graduation. Military operations depended on their young soldiers not having time to question how quickly everything was happening.

Tassie also exhibits impulsive behavior, which is concerning considering her job taking care of Mary Emma. When Tassie begins dating Reynaldo, a mysterious man in her Sufism class, she is completely swept away. This leads her to act in the stereotypical manner of one who is young and in love. While her actions begin as mostly harmless, she eventually begins taking Mary Emma with her to visit her boyfriend. She can tell there is something wrong with her actions when she feels defensive towards Sarah when asked about the situation. The reader sympathizes with Tassie until we discover that Reynaldo is potentially part of a terrorist sect. One of the main themes is Tassie realizing that her actions have consequences and this is therefore a huge wake up call for her.

These implications show that even moreso than in other generations, millennials in particular have grown up in a great period of political turmoil due to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Living in this time period has only exacerbated the already present tendency toward not knowing their place in the world that adolescents experience. Since millennials are defined as "those born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s", even the oldest members of this generation were in their adolescence when these attacks occurred. In order to understand what effects these attacks had on society now, we must look at the immediate effect this event had on the United States. Since the novel takes place almost directly

after the 9/11 attacks, we get to see a very cursory glance of the initial reactions people had to the event. For example, there is a scene when Tassie returns home for the holidays. Her family is watching the typical yearly Christmas specials when her mother comments, “A Grinch who stole Christma? With all that’s going on in the world we should have to deal with *that?*” (Moore 51). This shows that despite the family trying to move on as though everything is normal, there is still an underlying tension and fear regarding the paranoia many individuals had about another possible attack. This paranoia especially affected adolescents, and those who were to become adolescents in the time period following this attack because they knew nothing else. They grew up not knowing if a future was even possible for them. This is supported in the Newsweek article, “9/11’s Children Grow Up”, in which millennials cite being scared of an unknown evil being ready to attack at any moment. “Millennials crave order,” one expert says. One possible explanation for this is that millennials saw the nation in shambles. All of the authority figures in their lives were shaken to their cores about this event, so they had nowhere to look for help in dealing with their own confusion and trauma.

With this knowledge in mind, we can look at Tassie through the lens of both an adolescent and one who has been through a serious trauma. One of the most notable traits of Tassie’s is her formlessness; that is, her apparent lack of conviction for anything. Even though she is twenty years old and therefore presumably a sophomore in college, she does not have a major and is taking courses such as “Intro to Sufism” and “Wine Tasting”. There is no real indication of what she is actually interested in or what plans she has for her future career. This is portrayed as a typical route for current college students in the media today. According to research by Pennsylvania State University, the portion of undeclared first-year students is around twenty to fifty percent, depending on the institution (Freedman). This number is interesting

considering the job climate of today compared to the pre-9/11 world. Students are bombarded with an array of possibilities for what major to pursue. However, research suggests that students may not be at the right place in their development to make such a huge life decision (Freedman). Having Tassie be among this group of students cements her as a symbol of adolescence and the sense of lack of direction that is seen as typical for this age group.

However, while this uncertainty is commonplace for adolescents, millennials have an added sense of uncertainty regarding the future due to the fact that many of the jobs that millennials are expected to move into have not been created yet. With the rise in technological output, there is a slew of new opportunities that have not yet reached the point of fruition. However, one of the positive aspects of millennials is our skill for innovation and a willingness to try out all kinds of different job prospects. According to the Forbes corporation, the number of owners of new businesses is almost 30 percent individuals of the millennial generation (Pennington). This is shown through Tassie, in her willingness to essentially invent her job with Sarah and Mary Emma. For example, in the beginning of the novel Tassie states that she isn't even sure she likes children, saying "I was not especially skilled at minding children for long spells" (Moore 15). Additionally, Tassie's job is different even from most nanny jobs because she has to accompany Sarah through the entire adoption process. She's taking a risk, becoming involved in the life a child that she isn't even completely sure exists. This shows how willing Tassie, and other millennials, are willing to go to great lengths in order to find a job. Tassie's lack of narrow focus may have its concerning features, but the ability to throw oneself into an unfamiliar situation and to be versatile is a necessary skill for any job. Many millennials may not know exactly what field to go into, but an openness to new situations ensures that millennials are not as lost as some think in terms of employability.

In stable environments, this indecision is natural and most individuals have experienced this feeling at some point. However, at the time of 9/11, there were devastating consequences for some young individuals exhibiting these tendencies. For example, in the novel Tassie's brother Robert, or Gunny, is shown to be unclear about what he wants to do with his future, similar to Tassie. When talking to Tassie about his options after high school, he states, "Signing up for the army seems the only thing. It's either that or diesel driving school" (Moore 62). While this is said without much seriousness, he does end up joining the military and eventually dying for that decision. What's more, military operations were shown to disproportionately seek out Midwestern and low income students. According to the Chicago Tribune, nearly half of new recruits do not come from large cities. This statistic is almost matched by the number of poor recruits in comparison to recruits that are more well off (Torriero). Through Gunny's situation, Moore shows how adolescents, and specifically their lack of belonging, was exploited and contributed to the war effort around the time of the attacks and our retaliation.

In light of this uncertainty, one of the claims often levied against the millennial generation is that they are apathetic, especially concerning political issues, according to the Harvard Political Review. Much of this apathy stems from how "millennials are willing to engage in cognitive dissonance" (Scuderi). This term deals with the idea of simultaneously supporting two moral concepts. This inner conflict found in deciding what one believes can be frightening and many individuals choose to forgo taking a stance in order to avoid the potential discomfort of disagreeing with someone. Tassie exhibits this tendency, with what she refers to as "perfunctory politeness" (Moore 97). Tassie has more opinions than she openly expresses. Readers learn this fact almost immediately after being introduced to Tassie. After indicating her lack of interest in the mysterious death of some birds in her area, she reconsiders, "Or rather, that

is an expression of politeness, a false promise of delicacy-for in fact I wondered about them all the time” (Moore 15). This indicates that what may come off as apathy to the outside observer may in fact just be a strong desire to preserve social harmony. This is a common trait in the development of adolescents, as a great deal of self-worth at this level is based on other’s perceptions of them (McDevitt and Ormrod).

While this may seem to be universal to all generations and youths in general, extreme impulsivity is one of the main complaints levied against millennials in general. For example, one common phrase used by millennials is “YOLO”. This phrase stands for “you only live once” and seems to encapsulate the stereotypical millennial worldview. Its use is associated with actions that range from merely irresponsible, such as not studying, to downright dangerous, as with actions such as drunk driving or similarly dangerous activities. The use of “YOLO” perfectly supports the idea of millennial youths being particularly reckless and impulsive. However, its use can stem back to what it is like to grow up during the post 9/11 era. One reason for this is the fact that one of the first phrases used in times of great tragedy is to “live each day as though it is your last.” Constantly hearing this phrase has potentially made many young people take this idea literally. Additionally, being raised in this political climate meant being hyperaware of our own mortality. This corresponds with research from Psychology Today, which states that a desire to live in the moment is part of “post-traumatic growth” (Heflick). This helps support the idea that this impulsivity is linked to millennials trying to live through the trauma endured because of 9/11. Speaking from my own experience, there was constant vigilance on the news proclaiming the potential of another foreign attack, one that was potentially even more destructive. Therefore, there was a feeling that each day could very well be our last. This is heightened for our

generation in comparison to similar time periods of political turmoil because of the increasingly volatile nature of modern warfare.

This impulsivity may be similar to that displayed in other generations, but it is more public thanks to the influence of technology and social media. Therefore, the typical adolescent behavior or bad decisions and experimentation, it can be argued, may be the same but simply more readily on display. For example, the phrase “YOLO”, previously discussed, is mostly prominent on the internet, showing up on Twitter and in Facebook statuses. Unfortunately, the public nature of these posts yields much greater consequences than it did for generations previous. Now, social media posts can have consequences ranging from going viral and ruining one’s reputation to losing a job, not being admitted to college, or even being arrested. This is just another example of a way that typical adolescent behavior is made worse in the post 9/11 era. In the novel, technology is at a point where it is only beginning to emerge into what we know today. For example, Tassie describes one of her first experiences using Google in the novel.

An additional concern regarding modern technology and adolescents is the way that it allows millennials to avoid living their lives. This is already a main theme in the novel, as Tassie already takes a backseat stance in life. This is shown when she withholds her opinions in favor of simply agreeing complacently with what others are saying. This results in her being a rather quiet person, which is sometimes hard for the reader to comprehend since we see the novel through her eyes and know her deep opinions. This lack of communication skills goes along with this withdrawal from life and is also cited as a negative attribute of millennials. Tassie represents this aspect of adolescence the most clearly when she finds herself incapable of having a meaningful conversation even with her own brother. When discussing how she relates to Gunny, she states “I stayed quiet with him. Sometimes it is preferable to the talk (Moore 65).

Unfortunately, Gunny sends her an email urging her to keep him from joining the military. Tassie ignores the message, disconnecting from something meaningful in the way she is apt to do. Once going into the military causes Gunny's death, however, Tassie deeply regrets her decision and learns a lesson about the dangers of disconnecting from reality and herself. This shows Tassie as a prime example of the quintessential millennial. It is common for individuals at this age to use things like Facebook and other social media sites to distract themselves from doing things that are productive or deemed 'worthy'. This however shows a disconnect between the values of the older and younger generations, which may have an impact on the view other generations have of millennials. Finally, websites like Facebook are commonly used for communication purposes. This has radically changed how adolescents interact socially. According to surveys done by Nielsen, a prominent marketing company, 54% of millennials rely on social media and devices to remain connected. Digital communication has made it easier to separate communication from the personal aspects, like with Gunny's email to Tassie instead of having a conversation in person. This is especially relevant since Tassie is a college student, as Facebook was invented around the time the novel takes place by and for college students.

The prevalence of the internet has also led to a thirst for knowledge and a sense of entitlement to have knowledge whenever it was desired. The events of 9/11 were entrenched in a sense of mystery. It was a time of uncertainty about who attacked us, how, and it shocked the country to its core. This may have been one of the sources of the current desire for knowledge. Since millennials grew up in this climate, it is obviously more attached to our being than other generations. The main knowledge that was desired by the country during this time was the knowledge of who made the attack and what their aims were. Since the novel takes place almost directly after the attacks, Tassie notes that she was taking Intro to Sufism, an offshoot of Islam,

only because Intro to Islam was full. This example shows that in the wake of 9/11, people were eager to learn all they could about what they perceived to be a mysterious, unknown force.

However, since this thirst for knowledge was borne from an attack, there were still negative stereotypes that emerged about Arab people after the attacks. These stereotypes appear in the book in the form of Tassie's relationship with Reynaldo. She is shown to dress up for him in what appears to be stereotypical ritual garb from a nonspecific culture. This shows that, while she did not necessarily intend to cause harm, she has been taught to view him as rather exotic. The fact that he is "Brazilian" only adds to Tassie's infatuation with him.

From these examples, we can begin to see that millennials act in ways that are very similar to generations before, but 9/11 had such a monumental effect on society that growing up in its aftershocks had its costs for today's adolescents. The tendency towards impulsivity was increased due to the fear of not having a world to grow into. That and the uncertainties that already lie in adolescence are therefore made more intense. Additionally, these typical mistakes of youth are highly publicized by social media, making them seem more prevalent than they are. The implications of these attributes piling up are that in all of these ways, 9/11 amplified many adolescent tendencies, perhaps causing many of the negative traits millennials are accused of having. In particular considering the novel, Tassie is an embodiment of what it means to be an adolescent. She learns many hard lessons throughout the novel, many of them relating to 9/11, even though the event is never directly addressed in the novel. As Tassie's views change, we begin to see a shift in the mindset of America.

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