Protecting the Innocence of Youth: A Natural Reaction to 9/11

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The novel, *A Gate at the Stairs*, by Lorrie Moore presents several subtle topics that play a larger role than they initially appear to. These topics can be analyzed and discussed in terms of their contribution to the novel itself, or in terms of their contribution to American culture. One of those topics concerns cultural attitudes toward children. American culture has long regarded the innocence of childhood as a unique and precious phase of life. This cultural belief is frequently reflected in pieces of literature and *A Gate at the Stairs*, while quietly, does reflect these beliefs. In American culture, childhood is almost always considered innocent, fragile, and in need of protection at all costs. The terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the events that soon followed, pushed these cultural ideas about childhood to become more intense and more apparent. This shift can be seen in the novel, *A Gate at the Stairs*, through Tassie, her relationship with her younger brother, Robert, and her differing experiences with both children and adults. Analyzing the impact of this tragic event not only promotes a deeper analysis of *A Gate at the Stairs*, but also facilitates a better understanding of the strengthened desire to preserve American ideas of childhood in a post-9/11 world.

On September 11, 2001, a series of tragic events occurred that altered the way the American people carry out their day-to-day lives. The morning of September 11th, four planes, carrying roughly 260 passengers, took to the air between 8:00 AM and 9:00 AM, expecting routine flights ("September"). Soon, all four of these planes were hijacked by terrorists with the intent to cause destruction. At 8:46 AM, the first hijacked plane completed its terrible mission by crashing directly into the north tower of New York's World Trade Center ("September"). While first responders, news reporters, and onlookers watched as the north tower burned, most believed the

crash to be an accident. Some believed a theory that the pilot must have fallen asleep during the flight and others suggested the fault must lay within the mechanics of the plane. No one suspected that this was a planned attack, and certainly no one expected the destruction yet to come. At 9:03, less than twenty minutes after the first crash, a second plane flew straight into the south tower of the World Trade Center ("September"). The nation watched in horror as it became clear that this was no accident. President George W. Bush was notified of the second crash and by 9:31 AM, he delivered an address to declare the crashes "'an apparent terrorist attack on our country'" ("September"). Only minutes after the president delivered his address, a third plane crashed into the Pentagon at 9:45 AM and this urged the White House to be evacuated. At 10:03, the passengers on the fourth hijacked plane attempted to overthrow the hijackers, but the hijackers crashed the plane into a field in Pennsylvania, "approximately 20 minutes flying time from Washington, D.C." ("September").

For as tragic of an event as 9/11 was, it initially appears to serve only as a background for the novel and is only mentioned on a surface level. When 9/11 is first referenced, Tassie does not appear to display as much concern as was seen consistently among adults throughout the nation following the attacks. At the beginning of the novel, Tassie reflects on the events of 9/11 and the disconnection between the attacks and herself. She says, "the events of September… seemed both near and far… it was as if in a craning crowd, through glass, the way I knew (from Art History) people stared at the *Mona Lisa*" (Moore 5). From the very beginning, we can see that Tassie has created a mental and emotional divide between the attacks of 9/11 and her own personal life. She understands that she can see the events unfolding, but believes that she cannot touch or be touched by the ramifications of these attacks. Because Tassie does not feel threatened by what has happened, she exhibits a child-like attitude of assuming she is safe. Tassie

recognizes her immature mentality after having a conversation with her roommate, Murph, as she hears the news for the first time that morning. Murph makes a joke about the events and both girls fall "into a kind of hysteria – frightened, guilty, hopeless laughter," that Tassie had "never actually witnessed in women over thirty" (Moore 5). Her reaction to the attacks and her reflection upon that reaction in comparison to older women, both point out the immaturity of her response and highlight the separation between her current state and adulthood. "The immature… have not "gotten it together" in the same global way" as adults have (Prust 60). While Tassie is twenty years old, her sheltered home life has extended her adolescence, for she does not yet think or act as an adult. Therefore, Tassie does not yet recognize the cultural attitudes regarding the protection of the nation's youth. The distinctly different reactions of adolescents and adults were not the only indicators that the two are clearly separate stages of life, one of which Tassie has not yet made the transition to.

Within two hours, four planes had crashed through every piece of security Americans had. Fear became palpable throughout the nation and that fear began to heavily influence the decisions and actions of the nation's leaders shortly following the attacks. The War on Terrorism was launched, and from this, issues arose concerning racial and ethnic profiling and discrimination. On one hand, many individuals deemed profiling essential and even unavoidable. In an article for the *Post-Tribune*, Ann Coulter writes about the necessity of this profiling in order to recover a sense of safety and to maintain that safety. Coulter writes in reflection of the 9/11 attacks and in response to the prevention of an attempted terrorist attack on more United States airlines. She says, "it is a fact that you could not catch 24 Muslim terrorists by surveilling everyone…equally. Without the ethnic profiling going on outside of airports, no security procedure permissible inside airports would have prevented a terrorist attack that would have left

thousands dead" (Coulter). Immediately following the attacks, many individuals shared Coulter's opinion and it became normal to discriminate against individuals that were culturally different than the majority. Some individuals chose to speak out against those who believed as Coulter did, but these beliefs were not heard through the wall of fear that the nation had already built. One such voice was Sunera Thobani who wrote an article entitled, "Exception as Rule: Profile of Exclusion." Thobani attempts to bring attention to the extremism and oppression caused by the War on Terrorism. While the majority of adults agreed with Coulter about the necessity of racial profiling, Thobani argues that,

> the war on terrorism, marks a new phase in the exclusion of people of color from the Western liberal democratic project. Even as the war is presented to the world as a defense of democratic rights and freedoms, the U.S. administration is institutionalizing racial profiling as a domestic security measure. Liberal democracy makes claims to the equal treatment of individuals before the law, but such profiling singles out individuals as suspicious on the basis of their "race." (Thobani 597)

Because of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Middle Eastern, Muslim individuals became the stereotypical representation of terrorism. If an individual fit the "terrorist stereotype," then they faced constant suspicion and harassment, initiated mostly by the adults of the nation. Middle Eastern Muslims were outcast by the fearful majority, and whether an individual was suspicious or not, he or she was demonized by ethnic profiling (Thobani 597). By discriminating against Middle Eastern Muslims, the rest of the adult population separated them from the whole and increased their own fear by thinking of this group as something different than human.

The fear that lingered after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 not only influenced the out-casting of Middle Eastern Muslims, but motivated individuals to pull closer to what they believed was

normal, most especially other individuals like themselves. Americans had an increasing need for security and stability in their lives. They also had a growing desire to protect their families, particularly their children. Immediately following the terrorist attacks, many professionals came forward to tell parents how to help their children cope with the tragedy. In the week that followed the attacks, Loretta Reiser-Danner, an assistant psychology professor at West Chester University told a reporter from the *Herald News* that "the youngest children should be given reassurance about their safety" (Pukanecz). While buildings still smoldered and people were still missing, Americans were quick to consider the safety of the nation's children, even if it was simply protection from knowledge. Reiser-Danner suggested that parents limit children's access to information about the tragedy so that the children and teens could hear the filtered version from them instead. She went on to make the claim that children depend on their parents to interpret the world for them, even as teens. She makes the assertion that "we worry about our younger kids but our adolescents are not adults," further expanding the individuals included in the definition of childhood (Pukanecz).

This immediate, adult response is reflected in three different scenes in *A Gate at the Stairs*. In these scenes, the adopted parents of Mary-Emma, the child that Tassie cares for, hold meetings with other parents from the area. These parents come mostly from "transracial, biracial, [and] multiracial families," and the intention of these meetings is to discuss racial and ethnic issues in Troy, and to develop a plan of action to stop the profiling and discrimination of their children (Moore 153). While it is apparent that these discussions stray far from their purpose and deteriorate into racial slurs, the sharp contrast between the narrow, judgmental conversations of the adults and the innocent, unbiased play of the children upstairs is essential in emphasizing the contrast between adulthood and childhood. Even though the conversations are less than the

progressive discourses that they were intended to be, the initial inspiration and purpose of the meetings were to protect the children of these families.

This desire to protect the innocence of childhood led to the extension of what was culturally considered childhood, implying that even adolescents are in need of the protection of their parents. While the events of 9/11 presented parents with the challenge of explaining this tragedy to their children, an even bigger challenge emerged when parenting practices began to change. In a post-9/11 world, "parents became much more self-conscious about childrearing and about how to prepare the youth for a complex and changing future, while also insisting that childhood was a time of imagination and protection from the adult world" (Crain 547). In this tug-of-war, the desire to guard childhood innocence pulled harder on the minds of post-9/11 parents. In a world where the future was no longer certain, the nation's parents attempted to hold on to the purity of childhood for as long as they could manage.

While there is a clear, physical separation during the meetings that represents the maturity difference between the children and the adults in the novel, it must be taken into consideration that Tassie, a twenty year old college student, is also upstairs with the children, further demonstrating that she is not yet considered an adult. In modern American culture, college aged individuals are generally still under the care of their parents, blurring the lines of childhood and adulthood. Reactions to the events of 9/11 contributed to a "progressive legacy of protecting the young from premature entry" into the adult world (Crain 548). The general tendency to protect childhood innocence in American culture shifted to "prolonging childhood innocence" after the 9/11 attacks. In *A Gate at the Stairs*, this is not directly referenced, but it can be assumed by Tassie and Robert's lack of knowledge, that their parents agreed with the beliefs of the majority

of the nation regarding children seeing as they appear to have guarded the two from the realities of 9/11 and the war.

Although the adults in power, in the political world as well as the familial realm, deemed it necessary to filter the information that children received about the attacks, there was an emergence of intense curiosity from adolescents about the foreign nation and culture from which these terrorists came. In *A Gate at the Stairs*, Tassie takes note of this increased curiosity by explaining that she was forced to take Intro to Sufism as opposed to Intro to Islam, because the latter class was full for the spring semester due to a large interest in this generally unfamiliar culture (Moore 58). This is mentioned in the middle of a conversation between Tassie and her brother Robert in which they voice their lack of knowledge about the current state of the war. (Moore 58). Both are curious as to whether or not the nation is at war, "in or at – there was no preposition… for? – a place like Afghanistan" (Moore 58). This lack of knowledge highlights the sheltered understanding that Tassie and Robert have acquired, whether through a deliberate attempt by their parents to guard Tassie and Robert from information, or through purposeful omission of the subject in conversations.

Tassie herself displays a curiosity for unfamiliar cultures when she begins a relationship with a fellow student in her Intro to Sufism course. The student, Reynaldo, tells Tassie that he is Brazilian and she is fascinated with his "exotic nature." Unfortunately, the destruction of this child-like fascination is the first step in Tassie's "coming-of-age." When she realizes that she blindly trusted Reynaldo, only to find out that he was not who he claimed to be, Tassie begins to act as the majority of adults did during the time immediately after the 9/11 attacks. She accuses Reynaldo; "'You are a haddi: some sort of jihadist'" (Moore 206). As the conversation

progresses, Tassie while attempting to understand the situation, slowly separates herself from Reynaldo, reflecting the general reaction of the mature individuals following 9/11.

Unfortunately, Tassie's transition into adulthood is delayed just a little too long. Before this scene with Reynaldo unfolds and Tassie begins to shift into adulthood, she receives an email from her brother. He writes to her about joining the army and being content with his decision. Robert then sends Tassie another email that says, "*please read this new one and ignore previous email,*" so Tassie "ignored the first but failed to read the new one, seeing nothing dangerously swaggering in anything he'd sent so far" (Moore 181). At this point in the novel, Tassie is still thinking and acting like an adolescent, not yet grasping the importance of things such as reading emails. As we see at the end of the novel when Tassie finally reads Robert's second email, Robert was depending on Tassie to provide the guidance of an adult, but she was unable to do so because of her prolonged adolescence. At this point in the novel, we can clearly define both Robert and Tassie as still in a state of childhood. Robert would be considered a child because of his dependence on someone else, who he believes is "smart and independent and sure of [her]self" (Moore 306). Even if Tassie were to have opened the email when she first received it, she still would not have served as the reliable adult that Robert was searching for. Robert's second email asked Tassie to talk him out of joining the army, and from previous conversations in the novel between the two siblings, we can assume that Tassie would have responded in the same, dismissive manner as she had when the subject was presented before.

While at first the events of 9/11 appear to be a part of the background setting in the novel, *A Gate at the Stairs*, understanding the cause of Tassie's shift from childhood to adulthood brings this aspect of the novel to the forefront. With no response from Tassie, Robert joins the army, and unfortunately, pays the ultimate price in the service of his country. Robert's death follows

the confrontation between Tassie and Reynaldo, and pushes Tassie further into adulthood. At Robert's funeral, Tassie experiences a sort of mental and emotional breakdown. It is during this scene of the novel that Tassie fully transitions into adulthood by recognizing the importance of her brother. When she finally reads his email, she understands that she missed the opportunity to save his life, and this is hard for Tassie to cope with.

Tassie's complete transition into adulthood is in this scene where she acknowledges the importance of her younger brother and adopts the adult desire to guard childhood. *A Gate at the Stairs* not only shows how Tassie's view of childhood shifted, but is a reflection of how the terrorist attacks of 9/11 altered they way Americans define and protect childhood. Understanding this will provide a better reading of the "coming of age" aspect of this novel. While many readers may be quick to be angry with Tassie for her lack of action, most especially when she is expected to act as an adult and is unable to. Recognizing that her childhood has been drawn out may alter the way a reader responds to Tassie and her decisions throughout the novel. It is this "coming of age" aspect of the novel that promotes a reflection of American cultural ideals of childhood.

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