

Inaction and Anxiety: Tassie's Maturation in A Gate at the Stairs

By Mallory Wiedenkeller

In Lorrie Moore's A Gate at the Stairs, twenty year-old Tassie faces tragedies and hardships as she attempts to come of age in 21st century America. The challenges that are presented to her lead her to a life of observation and inaction, despite her ability to relieve herself of her negative experiences. Tassie's continued decision to remain apathetic and her refusal to take action against her challenges affects her life more negatively than if she had ever spoken up for herself or reached out to others.

Objectively, Tassie is a Midwestern girl who has moved from her rural home to the college town of Troy, where she has decided to study. She has a full time course load, a roommate, and a job as the nanny to an adopted child. Subjectively, Tassie is exposed to sex, romance, racism, and a sense of uncertainty toward her future. Tassie is generally reserved in public, but bursting with thoughts to herself, thoughts which, if she had ever spoken them, might have greatly affected her future.

A Gate at the Stairs allows a reader to listen to Tassie's decision making process, which is painstakingly slow. She is selfish, like many other twenty somethings, and exhibits multiple symptoms of depression, as the Anxiety and Depression Association of America defines them; Tassie shows signs of hopelessness and pessimism, as well as difficulty concentrating and making decisions, as evidenced by not only her interpersonal reactions, but by her lack of direction in her education. Generally, a 20-year-old would be a sophomore or junior at a traditional university, but when Tassie tells her family the classes that she signed up for in the spring semester hardly display a sense of direction. She tells her father, "I've registered for

another literature survey-Brit Lit from 1830 to 1930-Intro to Sufism, Intro to Wine Tasting, a music appreciation course titled Soundtracks to War Movies, and a geology course called Dating Rocks.” (Moore, 50.) This odd collection of courses show that Tassie does not have a degree in sight, as she in into her later semesters as an undergraduate student, but has yet to even decide on a major, so she signs up for introductory courses, hoping that something might inspire her to study more.

This lack of direction is actually quite common amongst young adults in the 21st century. The concept of reaching adulthood is changing forms, as more people see ‘growing up’ as self-discovery more than security, whether it comes from professional and financial success or from relationships. This sense of ‘emerging adulthood’ was the topic of an article in the New York Times, where Jeffery Jensen Arnett, professor of psychology at Clark University, claims that emerging adulthood has its own “psychological profile” that explores “identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between and a rather poetic characteristic he calls “a sense of possibilities.”” (Henig). This concept of emerging adulthood rings especially true for Tassie, as she shows no signs of certainty about her future.

Tassie also ties herself to people who, despite being adults who are married and have professions, depend on her to be their listening ear, so she catches a glimpse of what it is like to technically be an adult, perhaps without totally reaching the adult mindset. She sees these traits in Sarah, whom Tassie slightly idolizes. Tassie is the nanny to Sarah’s newly adopted daughter, Mary-Emma. Sarah is a restaurant owner who decides to adopt a child with her husband, Edward. It is easy to see early on that Sarah could be Moore’s potential projection of Tassie as an adult: scatterbrained and driven by her selfish desires (as Sarah uses her adoption of Mary-Emma to lead a racial committee of sorts). Sarah is a free spirit, one who acts on emotion rather

than practicality. Even when Tassie meets Sarah for the first time, Sarah bounces between various topics without ever explaining why she would need a nanny after the university's holiday break, despite her lack of pregnancy. Tassie even describes Sarah's smile as, "big, theatrical [and] a little crazy" (Moore, 13). Before the interview, Sarah lets Tassie, a young girl that Sarah has never met before, in on the hot gossip about a gay affair that her neighbors were having, even though Tassie had no idea who they were. It is this type of free spirit which allows Tassie to idolize Sarah, though, as she represents financial and romantic security despite her lack of direction, even within one interview.

As much as Tassie idolizes Sarah, she criticizes her mother. When she goes home for break, Tassie continually regards her mother as a person who focuses on her responsibilities more than her happiness. To Tassie, her mother represents a sense of being stuck, held in place by her life choices. Her mother chose to marry a potato farmer and live in the rural Midwest, where she worked on the farm with her husband and raised two children. Tassie appears to have little to no interest in such a life, as she views her mother with growing scrutiny during her stay at home over the holidays. Her attitude could be attributed to a small dose of anxiety that Tassie feels as she is home, since she largely holes herself up in her room so that she does not feel forced to talk to anyone in her family.

Seth Meyers, a clinical psychologist with the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health, wrote a piece for 'Psychology Today' in which he explores female relationships, and why they are often stressful and competitive. He states, "...the majority of female criticism actually stems from feeling inadequate in an area of life they value highly." (Meyers). Tassie could be feeling anxious about her ability to grow up and become a stable, functional member of society, even if that role is filled by marrying a potato farmer and mothering two children.

Anxiety as a whole runs rampant through adolescent and young adult life, so it could be very likely that Tassie is facing these feelings without realizing what they actually are. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America lists some characteristics of anxiety that Tassie displays: "...depressed or irritable mood," which she demonstrates in regards to her mother, "withdrawing from friends or activities," which she does at the university, where her only real friends are her roommate, Murph, the promiscuous and vivacious girl who goes and does whatever she wants, and her boyfriend, Reynaldo, who lies to Tassie about being a jihadist, and "low self-esteem," which Tassie exhibits as she has a continuous monologue in her head.

Tassie's anxiety at this time in her life could also be elevated as she copes with the events of September 11, as the novel is set shortly after the terrorist attacks. Dr. Steven M. Mirin explains depression and anxiety following the 9/11 terrorist attacks to Newsweek magazine and claims, "...an individual's vulnerability to the more severe forms of anxiety and depression may result from the complex interaction of psychosocial, developmental and environmental factors with one's biological and genetic makeup" (Mirin). Dr. Brad Schmidt even reports that "In the aftermath of 9/11, some 4 million Americans faced exaggerated fears or generalized anxiety disorder" (Schmidt).

At this time in her life, Tassie is facing the pressures of living on her own, the responsibility of caring for a small child as her job, the uncertainty of her academic and professional career, and the news that her younger brother is deciding that he wishes to join the military as the United States enters the war on terror. It is reasonable to assume that all of these factors act as high stressors in her life, and that she could unknowingly be dealing with the repercussions of that stress.

Overall, A Gate At The Stairs serves as an example of coming of age as a woman in the 21st century as it displays the wide range of emotion, radical decisions, uncertainty, and anxiety that accompanies growing up, especially in the American landscape, where adulthood is being redefined. Tassie experiences love and copes with loss and is subjected to blatant racism, particularly when she was caring for Mary-Emma one day that some children called the baby a nigger. She is forced to work through her emotional hardships, as she attempts responsibility and individuality for the first time in her life. A short psychoanalytic view of Tassie suggests that she may be dealing with an anxiety disorder, though she is unaware, and she attempts to push through the hardships that she faces with an open mind, but Tassie's biggest downfall is her refusal to act out. Tassie is entirely dependent on her frustratingly long-winded uncertainty about everything. She is often unsure of how to properly give Mary-Emma the care that she needs, such as when Sarah chose to hold meetings in her home with other parents of biracial children. Sarah essentially uses these meetings as an excuse for the adults, who are supposed to be wiser and capable of making a change, to sit and complain and generally be racist for a few hours. Tassie remains upstairs with the children, who ironically represent the change that the adults would like to see in the world. Rather than speaking up to Sarah, and telling her that these meetings are accomplishing nothing, Tassie remains quiet and lets the racism continue.

Tassie also plays an inactive role in her brother's life as he makes the decision to join the armed forces. He voices his idea to Tassie when she visits home for Christmas and she can not bring herself to actively portray her contempt for the idea. Eventually, he does join, and he goes to the Middle East and is killed. Tassie later finds an email from her brother that asks for her real opinion, as he would have taken it into account. Even though Tassie voicing her concerns about the military would not have ultimately saved her brother's life, she could have avoided such

devastation, stress that led her to actually lying inside her brother's casket, right next to him. If Tassie knew how to handle her anxiety, she may not have been driven to extreme and socially unacceptable behavior such as that.

Though anxiety disorders and depression are fairly common amongst young adults, they are not dominant throughout the young adult community. A Gate at the Stairs allows readers to experience Tassie's stress and know that those feelings of uncertainty, of inaction, and sometimes of general apathy are part of coming of age, especially in the United States in the 21st century, specifically after 9/11. Many Americans face emotional trauma and anxiety throughout their lives without understanding what they are experiencing. By recognizing anxiety and high stressors as adolescents reach maturity, perhaps Americans can more adequately emerge into adulthood and find themselves as they venture further in their lives, toward love and loss and stability and salaries. It is crucial within the coming of age portion of our lives to recognize that the act of becoming an adult is a slow process, one which requires self-actualization and being fulfilled, as well as accepting responsibilities and dealing with stress. Readers can view Tassie's tale as one to learn from, as her built up refusal to speak up or act proved to have a significant impact on her psychological well-being.

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