

## **To Be or Not to Be a Woman**

By Kierra Wilson

For centuries, women have been expected to be domesticated and servant-like towards men, and to a certain degree, children as well. Women are expected to be fun and exciting, intelligent, physically acceptable, and able to satisfy her partner, or fear being replaced. In Lorrie Moore's "A Gate at the Stairs", there is no exception. Lorrie Moore shows that, to be a woman, much work is necessary. More interestingly, Moore explores the difficulties of being of the female gender in various stages of life. Be it Sarah, Tassie, or future Mary-Emma, "A Gate at the Stairs," is a great representation of the difficulties encountered, physically, emotionally, and/or psychologically, by women in any world or society, and in every generation.

Lorrie Moore presents a variety of characters who are battling with different struggles, at different stages in their lives. For Tassie's character, the story as a whole, undoubtedly serves as a "coming of age" novel. Tassie, is at the stage in her womanhood, where she is desperate to do the "right" thing, and be the "right" kind of person. Moore purposefully places the reader inside of Tassie's mind, and allows us to see exactly how deep sexism and feminist theory goes for an everyday young woman. In many ways, Tassie's feministic mentality is portrayed through her thought process, since we don't receive much dialogue from her throughout the book. In comparison to Sarah and Tassie's mother, Tassie's ideas of womanhood are clearly different, and more youthful and naïve. According to the article, "Middle Ages: Change in Women's Personalities and Social Roles," in which Nicola Newton and Abigail Stewart point out the changes that occur in women as they age, Tassie's differing perspective of womanhood from the older women in the book, makes sense. According to the article, mid-life for women (ages 28-48 [page 77]), is the time where the focus is on "identity and generativity", while young adult

women are “eager and willing to fuse identity with that of others, in both friendships and relationships.” In the story, Tassie provides ample examples of a young woman “eager” to intertwine her identity with others. With her short-lived relationship with Reynaldo, for example, Tassie quickly and easily aspired to “fuse” her identity with his. As a woman, she felt it only right to conform to her male spouse. Tassie attempted with great desperation to be Reynaldo’s “ideal” woman. With her playing dress-up for Reynaldo, and wearing perfume that possessed a name which sounded like it may bring her closer to his ideals, Tassie shows that as a young woman, the search for identity has a lot to do with who she is surrounded by and involved with. In the article mentioned before, “Middle Ages: Change in Women’s Personalities and Social Roles,” it is stated that, “Women’s identities were affected by social roles if they had been able to make individual choices about family and careers.” (Stewart, 76) It is clear that Tassie’s idea of what it means to be a good woman has been tainted by the norms that society has created. The fact that she had created a “fairytale” family with herself, Reynaldo, and Mary-Emma, show that being a wife and mother is of importance to Tassie. At one point in the story, Tassie even states that Reynaldo, “made her feel in possession of a prize.” (*A Gate at the Stairs*, 165) Along with her family aspirations, Tassie’s random classes show that she has no authentic direction, or solid idea of what it is that she is going to school for. The fact that she is going to school, however, adds to the article’s statement in relation to women’s search for identity through family and careers. Tassie’s character shows, through her thoughts alone, the difficulties in being a young woman...the “right way.”

Feminism, as explained in Lois Tyson’s *Using Critical Theory* “seeks to understand the ways in which women are oppressed – socially, economically, politically, and psychologically—in order to reduce, if not eliminate their oppression.” *A Gate at the Stairs*, does not particularly

show a “feminist character,” however, the characters that Moore creates are clear representations of a feminist society, especially in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. In the story, gender roles are both challenged and conformed to, and even though the story is set in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is almost a default thought-process by the women in the story. From generation to generation, the women in the story all display different dispositions which are all derived from their ideas of what it means to be a strong woman. Sarah, Tassie’s boss, is initially looked at by Tassie, as a strong and fierce independent woman. She owns her own restaurant, and “goes half” on all purchases with her husband. In a way, this gives Sarah power, and takes away from Edward, her husband’s traditional role as sole provider. Her maintenance of her last name, is also a strong indication that Sarah is one who believes that women are undoubtedly equals to men. If there was a feminist present within the novel, then Sarah (or at least who Sarah portrayed herself to be) would’ve been the closest fit. From her sassy disputes and altercations, to her bumper sticker, “BEHIND EVERY SUCCESSFUL WOMAN IS HERSELF” (A Gate at the Stairs, 37) Sarah gives off the aura of a woman who believes in the importance of women empowerment. Even with all of her supposed strengths, it is later discovered that Sarah too, is struggling to break the psychological chains that society has placed on the mindsets of women, that men are “best” at making tough decisions. Though Sarah has a successful restaurant, her own money, and the ability to do (pretty much) as she pleases, behind the façade of this “strong” woman, lies a woman who allowed her husband to take and maintain control of a situation which resulted in the death of their son, and eventually the removal of Mary-Emma. In the beginning of the novel, it is obvious that Tassie desires to locate her individuality, as a person, and as a woman. In seeing Sarah carry on with such a lacking of emotional messiness, Tassie initially develops an admiration for Sarah, but

ultimately discovers that Sarah's "togetherness" is merely a mirage of what in reality, is weakness.

In many settings, the topic of feminism, is one that is regarded with sensitivity. Some men see it as an insult or joke, when they call a woman a feminist. It is possible, that Lorie Moore purposefully included certain scenes and details in this book to respond to men who take the regarding of women as equal, as a joke. If one were to compare society's ideal woman versus the ideal man, it would be with ease that one could conclude the nonsense of seeing the feminist ideas as a "funny matter." A good woman, is clean, attractive, a good cook, able to bear and maintain children, intelligent, pious, and goal-oriented. A good man, on the other hand, is relatively easy on the eyes, honorable, and a provider. Even as a young girl, Tassie takes note that more attention and energy was given to her over her brother. She says, "There had been only enough orthodontia money for one of us, so it went to the daughter, whose looks would matter (wasted on me! A smile-less girl I felt sure no man would ever desire—not deeply)" (A Gate at the Stairs, 59) In the article, "The Booty-Call: A Compromise Between Men's and Women's Ideal Dating Strategies, by Peter K. Jonason, it is stated that "Men are more likely to seek access to numerous sex partners with minimal investment, whereas women place a greater emphasis on obtaining committed, long-term mates." (Jonason, 1). This is the expected norm for most young men and women. It is expected that women remain more interested in purity than men. It takes a lot out of one who aspires to conform to society's strict ideas of what it means to be a "good woman." Mary-Emma, a toddler, has even experienced the difficulties of being of the female gender. Several times after Mary-Emma is brought to the Brinks-Thornwood home, Sarah receives harsh criticism for allowing Mary-Emma's hair to be as it is. If Mary-Emma was a boy, then it is absolutely fair to assume that the style of his hair, would have been of minute

importance. With Mary-Emma, however, Moore shows that the standard of beauty for women, knows no age.

As a young woman, Tassie finds herself transitioning from girlhood, and preparing to enter into middle-age adulthood next. In being stuck in such a transitional period of life, Tassie, like most young women, find it necessary and helpful, to have somewhat of an idea of the type of woman she'd like to be, and what steps are crucial in the journey of getting there. In the article, "Choirs and Split Voices: Female Identity Construction in Lorrie Moore's "Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?"" Monica Fagan says, "Moore's novel reminds us just how complicated it is for statistics to capture how women in general define themselves." (Fagan, 3) Though Fagan is not speaking specifically about *A Gate at the Stairs*, she is nonetheless dead on in her observation. It is simple to assign a statistic upon women, based on their age and gender, but the science behind identifying one's own individual womanhood, is not an easy task. In the novel, we are taken along on Tassie's journey of "coming to age" and her hard lessons are proof of Fagan's observation about Moore's authorship. The two women Tassie take from the most, are Sarah and her mother, though neither are who she desires to be. In many ways, Tassie seems to even despise her mother and view her as a weak individual. Though she may not have specifically said so, her thoughts certainly elude towards dissatisfaction with the woman that her mother is. Tassie's mom, who shares generations with Sarah, is a woman who had accepted the society-created norms of men and women. Tassie mentions that, "My mother had thought she was marrying a college president's son but got a hobby farmer instead, yet she'd followed him. She stayed with him wherever the hell it was they were going. She was like a stickleback fish caught inland as the glacier retreated and the rivers—the only access to the sea—disappeared." (*A Gate at the Stairs*, 54) Here, we are given the idea that Tassie's mom married her husband in pursuit of

a sole provider. Sarah attempts to go against the “normal” role of women, while Tassie’s mom go right along with it. Usually, when one gives a loved-one a gift, there is much thought put into it. Tassie’s mother buying her a pearl necklace for Christmas, because, “Every woman should have a pearl necklace,” show that she has completely (or mostly) accepted what movies and other media outlets, have deemed “right” for a woman. Seeing this, Tassie’s young mind tells her to make her own way, without relying on a man. However, her relationship with Reynaldo show that her ideals are more similar to her mother’s than not.

The roles of the women in Lorrie Moore’s *A Gate at the Stairs*, speaks volumes towards the boxed-in expectations for women. Tassie’s mother, is more or less a stay-at-home mom, who occasionally gardens, as somewhat of a hobby. Each time Tassie visits home, we see her mother tending mostly to the home and family needs. Along with Tassie’s mom, there is Sarah. Although Sarah is a business owner, it is no coincidence, that her business is that of cooking. As the old saying goes, “A woman’s place, is in the kitchen!” Even with the attempt to go against the socially constructed gender norms, Moore still keeps the women in the story “in place.” Tassie, on the other hand, is not completely molded into her “place” as a woman. Although she is inevitably influenced by the women she is surrounded by, as well as society’s influence as a whole, Tassie’s experience leaves her the only woman in the story who might be brave enough, to just...be.

As a young woman in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, Tassie is still in the stage of figuring herself out. Moore creates Tassie as a character who experiences a great amount of growth, and exploration of *her* womanhood. Through her experience with men, Tassie grows to prefer independence above the traditional dependent role that many women take on. Her decision to “never let a man drive her car,” after hearing Sarah’s story, is not totally rational, but provides

her with a sense of security. With her failed “relationship” with Reynaldo, and Sarah’s horrific story about her and Edward’s past, by the end of the book it is evident that Tassie has discovered a sense of identity and is blossoming into womanhood, as she takes control of a situation—for once—and concludes her phone conversation with Edward. In the article, “Narcissism in Midlife: Longitudinal Changes in and Correlates of Women’s Narcissistic Personality Traits,” the authors relate concerning women that, “Middle adulthood has been described as a time of both psychological growth and increasing awareness of limitations.” (Edelstein, Newton, & Stewart, 1180) When considering such an observation about women during middle adulthood, the understanding of Sarah and Tassie’s mother is reconsidered. This, according to the article, means that at some point, Tassie too, will reach her “awareness of limitations,” and accept her “role” in society—one way or another—as most women do.

As a woman, it takes a great deal of strength, courage, and wisdom, to correctly discern what it means to “be a woman.” Lorrie Moore’s, *A Gate at the Stairs*, displays the difficulties in living up to society’s idea of a “good” woman. The transition from girlhood to womanhood, is unclothed as a true struggle. This struggle is born due to the socially accepted “womanly” etiquette that is learned throughout girlhood which is challenged, once the new woman begins to explore her power and individuality. Tassie, Sarah, and even Mary-Emma, all experience the tiring and difficult desire to be the “right” kind of woman. Ultimately, Lorrie Moore’s novel gives young women, like Tassie, the opportunity to choose who they become, and how they become that person...and the understanding, that it’s perfectly okay.

## Works Cited

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