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Bachelor thesis paper
11 may 2011

Pictures of Youth

A Research of the Portrayal of Youth in Contemporary American Fiction.

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Introduction

Young people have always been fascinating. They are often at the forefront of social change, and often they are the cause of that change. They are the future and the backbone of society, but very often also a cause for heartache in older people. In short, they are a crucial part of any given society. Whether or not fiction can be seen as representative of society is always open for debate, but more often than not reality is quite well reflected in fiction. It is interesting, therefore, to look at the role ascribed young people in the way they are represented in contemporary fiction. In order to do this an accurate picture of young people in the last three decades, the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, is needed. Focusing on contemporary American literature and culture, two books lend themselves perfectly for this purpose, namely *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* by Dave Eggers and *Freedom* by Jonathan Franzen.

A comparison of character descriptions reveals several patterns, but fiction always includes the possibility of incongruity with reality. In order to research this, the book *Generation Me* by Jean M. Twenge (2006) lends itself perfectly. This study of the development of the latest generations gives an accurate and detailed view of how young people seem to develop and have been developing the last twenty years. By comparing *Generation Me* to the novels there emerge both incongruities and similarities between a study of youth in the real world and the way youth is portrayed in fiction. Due to the factual nature of *Generation Me* the incongruities are probably because of the limited knowledge of reality of novelists.

The Equality Revolution:

Character Description 1980s

The description of youth in the 1980s is based on the main characters in Jonathan Franzen's novel *Freedom*, Patty and Walter. However, only the first section of the novel, Patty's autobiography, is relevant in this case, as this is the only part of the novel in which the pair are observed and described during their youth. At the same time, we need to take into account that we are, indeed, dealing with an autobiography. The picture of Patty which emerges is one she creates herself, while referring to herself continually in the third person. As can be found at a later point in the novel, this autobiography was also written during a period of severe depression, and Patty's sadness and disgust with herself are prominent in the autobiography. This does cast a different light on the portrait as Patty's descriptions are coloured by her negative emotions of twenty years later. As such, the negativity reflects on the 2000s society.

The first part of the autobiography is not relevant to look at, as it describes Patty's years as an adolescent in the 1970s, in which Walter does not yet feature. Also, the first chapter does not give an explanation for Patty's most important characteristics and is, as such, unimportant when trying to form a character description. The third part of the novel features their time together after college and after the birth of their children. Even though both are still in their twenties, the steps of finishing college and entering parenthood are not generally associated with youth. This makes the second part of the autobiography the most relevant source for creating a portrait of youth in the 1980s. Even though the chapter starts out with an indication that part of this section takes place in the late 1970s the bulk of the period covers the 1980s.

Patty Berglund's most prominent characteristic is her competitive personality. This plays a big part in her development as a person and in the way she handles challenges. She

goes to college on a scholarship for her athletic ability, although it is not clear whether her athletic abilities foster her need for competition or whether her competitive spirit fuels her athletic achievements. It most probably stems from the way in which Patty's parents seem to favour her siblings over her in adolescence. This only changes over twenty years later when Patty's father dies while Patty is the only one of his children who has achieved independence from him. Fact remains that even after graduating from college, thus no longer being an athlete, Patty remains fiercely competitive. This competition is directed mostly at her family, but later in the novel also at Walter and his assistant. The second chapter of the autobiography starts out with Patty denying she has a vivid recollection of her first three years in college, even though the following pages accurately address this time-period. She blames this semi-conscious state on the way athletic scholars were treated at her college, Minnesota State College. She recalls a situation in which the jocks were prepared, welcomed and housed together, thus creating a situation in which jocks only make friends with other jocks and sign up for classes with other jocks. Patty's insistence on using the term jock is rather relevant, as she depicts them almost as a different species. It is also important to notice that she keeps calling herself as a jock as well. Jock is a derogatory term for athletes who look down on non-athletes. The *Urban Dictionary* makes a clear distinction between jocks and athletes, the former abusing the prestige earned through athletic prowess by picking on less popular people (Urban Dictionary). However, any jocks that Patty might have befriended in this period are not even marginally important and are hardly mentioned at all. In fact, Patty's best friend is not a jock at all. Eliza, psychologically unstable and drug-abusing, is crucial to Patty's development as a person and is also responsible for bringing Walter into Patty's life.

Even though Patty's observations are very attentive to other people's appearances, Patty herself is certainly not vain. Her appearance as such is of little importance to her, with

the exception of a focus on her height, which as a basketball-player is important to her. The only time she suddenly notices her appearance is at the concert where she first meets Walter. Even in this instance the attention to her appearance is limited to noticing a sharp contrast with her surroundings and no other, more specific reference is made except that she is grateful for Walter's ordinariness (Franzen, 71).

Friendships are important to young people. Throughout her college years Patty is adept at making bad decisions concerning these. Her friendship with her teammates is undisputed, but is based on a dependence on each other during a game and a fierce competition amongst each other for starting positions. Her friendship with Eliza is of an entirely different nature and far more intense than any other friendship she has enjoyed. In retrospect Patty portrays Eliza as a psychologically frail and damaged person with a manipulative personality. Patty blames her total focus on and devotion to sports as the reason she never saw Eliza as such a dangerous person. This friendship leads to cohabitation, removing Patty from her jock friends as roommates. Only after Eliza's manipulations have become apparent to Patty does she end the friendship (Franzen, 88-91). The only other friendship of importance is Patty's friendship with Walter, which eventually leads to romantic involvement and later marriage and children. Both friendships are based on devotion to Patty and the belief that she is special. This seems to indicate a need for nurturing which Patty lacked growing up, as she relates at great length in the first part of her autobiography.

Romantically, Patty seems equally adept at making bad choices as she is with friendships. Only her involvement with Walter seems like the right choice, but she makes it hastily and based on unsound judgement. Crucial to Patty's late development of romantic interest is the fact that she was raped during high school. This has led her to be careful with and, for a long time, uninterested in boys. Her first romantic involvement is with an ex-

boyfriend of Eliza's, Carter. Patty views him as her boyfriend and describes the time of their involvement as "the first of the two indisputably happy periods in Patty's life." (Franzen, 62) This relationship ends when Patty finds out that Carter has not been seeing her exclusively. The only other romance in Patty's life is an infatuation with Walter's best friend and roommate, Richard. During the college years this does not, however, become more than just an infatuation as Richard is highly protective of Walter, who by this time has already fallen deeply in love with Patty.

Walter Berglund is a very giving person. He grew up in rural Minnesota as the middle son of an alcoholic and a physically struggling mother. His brothers were selfish and criminal, which increased Walter's very responsible, calm and caring personality. He spent his youth working hard in his parent's motel and studying hard. In college Walter keeps up this kind of life. It is described by his friend and roommate Richard who tells Patty that "[Walter] is working construction twenty-five hours a week and pulling down As in law school" (Franzen, 105). Walter is well organized, hard-working and extremely interested in politics and environmentalism. His political ideologies are the main force behind his later endeavours, but they are already fully developed during his college years as described by Patty. He enjoys talking about them and does this at great length. As far as friendships are concerned, Walter has a couple of friends beside Richard, but they are of no real importance. When Walter and Patty start going out it is not regular dating as Walter tries not to push Patty too hard. Three of his female friends are with them and they convince Patty that Walter is an excessively worthy person (Franzen, 77).

Walter appreciates art and his three female friends claim that he "had dreamed of being a film director or even an actor" (Franzen, 77). This is in part where his admiration of Richard comes from, as Richard is a talented musician. This is also why Walter takes Patty to plays and museums, even though she expresses only marginal interest in these things. He is

absolutely devoted to Patty from the start and makes no effort to hide this. He is sweet, respectful and patient with Patty the whole time. Patty describes several times how Walter is obviously sexually attracted to her but hesitant to undertake any action out of fear that his desire will not be reciprocated.

An important factor in the start of Walter's part in Patty's life is Patty's friend Eliza. Before Patty ever even met Walter he had already been demonized by Eliza. Walter in turn was the first to see that Eliza was damaged and dangerous, in his opinion because of Eliza's distrust and hate for him which gave him the chance to "see her more clearly" (Franzen, 100).

Walter's political views are an important part of his personality. His ideals are feminist and anti-growth mostly, but even though he feels strongly about these causes he disregards them in favour of Patty as his love for her outweighs all other feelings. This does not prevent him from pursuing a career in environmental projects which let him work on something that is important to him. Walter's anti-growth ideology is deeply rooted in the damaging effect humans have on the environment. Walter learned to love nature in his youth, staying at his mother's lakeside cabin.

Patty and Walter were both steered by the times they lived in. Patty was able to attend the same college as Walter because she was offered an athletic scholarship. At that time this was still new and unusual for women. As Patty and Walter discuss, this would not have been possible without Title Nine. Title Nine is a law introduced in 1972 which regulated equal rights and opportunities for women in government-funded education (Meserve, 2). Another strongly time-related factor in their relationship is the venue of their meeting. They meet at a concert of Walter's roommate Richard, at that time the boyfriend of Patty's friend Eliza. This is a punk-concert and Patty feels out of place, as she is not a punk. It is why she quickly connects with Walter as he is no punk either and thus makes her stand out less. Punk was defined and flourished in 1976/77 (Steensma et al. 318) and a punk-concert is therefore

typical of the early 1980s. The political ideologies that Walter expresses are also a novel but important thing in the early 1980s. His anti-growth statements regarding capitalism are based on the views of the influential Club of Rome, a think-tank founded in 1968 which tries to eliminate the danger of uncontained capitalistic depletion of natural resources. Walter feels very strongly about this cause because it ties in tightly with his love for nature, especially back in the early 1980s when the Club's focus was mainly developing the concept of sustainability (Club of Rome).

The most important fact in the 1980s is the firm believe that the people in it have the ability to make life the way they want it. Walter firmly believes in changing the world for the better and Patty believes in giving herself completely so as to benefit her athletic abilities. She believes in making a life with Walter and raising her children better than she was raised herself. These factors combine to show the high optimism of the 1980s.

Youth in Revolt:

Character descriptions 1990s

The picture of this decade is based on Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. The pair who form this portrait are the fictional Dave Eggers and his brother Toph, which is short for Christopher. An important factor here is the degree in which the book is actually fictional, as the author states in the colophon that this book is a work of non-fiction with the exception of forgotten dialogue and passages of obvious meta-text. However, at the start of the preface the author refutes his own statement and claims that "many parts have been fictionalized in varying degrees, for various purposes" (Eggers, ix). The author then goes on to mention the parts that have been fictionalized to a certain degree, these being the aforementioned dialogue, certain characters, locations and instances of time-changes.

One of the most important factors shaping the main characters of interest in the novel is the passing away of their parents. This is described at great length in the first chapter of the book. This chapter focuses in great detail on the effect of cancer on their mother and her subsequent deterioration. Their father's death is also described in this chapter, but more in passing through brief passages between the longer passages which describe the mother's illness. Their parent's passing away is extremely important to the personalities and development of the main characters. The money they receive by their father's life-insurance and the money earned by selling their house provides the main characters and their sister, a minor character in the novel, with plenty of money to make the move to California possible. The rest of the book is set in California, with the exception of chapter X which is the account of the visit that the narrator Dave makes to his former hometown. He makes this visit in order to attend a wedding of an old friend. He does, however, make a number of personal stops as well, most importantly finding his mother's ashes and then throwing them into Lake

Michigan.

The main character in *AHWO SG* is Dave Eggers. It can be assumed that this Dave is almost identical to the writer Dave Eggers. However, as the author points out that this is in fact a fictionalized account of the writer's life there is a very real possibility that the writer has taken certain literary liberties in order to make himself come across more to his own liking. Clearly, only if we consider the book as fiction, it becomes possible to discuss the portrait of the book's Dave Eggers. The picture of the novel's Dave Eggers is made up mostly by the centre portion of the book which comes in the form of a transcript of an interview (Eggers, 184-237). This passage consist of a number of very personal anecdotes that range from his father's alcoholism to the impact the move of Mister T to the town had on his community when he was growing up. The interview also touches on his personal obsessions and anxieties. During the interview Dave repeats his entitlement to a position in the popular tv-show for which the interview is a tryout. He is bursting with confidence throughout most of the interview and the book in total. This, however, is not the complete picture of Dave Eggers, as he is both self-loving and self-loathing. His confidence is his most prominent characteristic, but it is always balanced by severe doubt of himself or his capacities. He often frets about what might happen to his little brother when he is not there to look out for him and imagines gruesome scenes of rape and murder.

Dave starts a magazine called *Might Magazine* together with some of his best friends. A significantly large part of the book is devoted to this magazine. The narrator describes some of the work that he and his friends have to do in order to finance their endeavor. The work, however, is deemed "misuse of [their] creative powers" (Eggers, 181) and the launch of the magazine is financed by Dave using the money that came to him after his parents' passing away. The magazine is meant to rally the youth of America and improve their nation. There is a strong anti-establishment motivation in the magazine and at some point the

narrator even describes and explains an article in which the magazine distances itself from generally expected social values like marriage, religion and the American right to sell arms (Eggers, 179-180). It is because of the magazine that a camera crew comes to Dave, after he has been turned down for the tv-show, to film them interviewing an applying cartoonist. In this passage Dave talks at great length about how special he is as a typical representation of his generation, an association which returns often. The passage shows a vain side to Dave's personality. When considering the mothers of the kids in Toph's baseball-team the narrator even says "[t]hey are the old model and we are the new" (Eggers, 57).

The goal and tendencies of the magazine indicate to some extent the political interests of Dave. Another show of his political interest is the way in which the author uses the acknowledgements section to criticize his brother Bill for being a Republican (Eggers, xxi). As the novel is set in San Francisco and its sister-city Berkeley, two cities known for being very progressive and politically left-wing, Dave's views have no need to be explicitly expressed. Dave's surroundings have views similar to his, which explains for the absence of political discussions in the novel.

Romantic relationships form a fairly big part in Dave's life, but he seems to eschew meaningful relationships and hide behind the need to care for Toph. The one person who plays a big part in his life romantically is Kirsten, his girlfriend when his parents died and his on-again-off-again girlfriend while living in Berkeley. The relationship ends when they have simply grown apart and moved on. There are a few passages of intimate moments with women that do not play a major part in Dave's life.

Toph Eggers is an important character in the narrator's life, as he is not only the little brother but also in many respects the author's ward. This does not, however, prevent the narrator from placing Toph in a more secondary position in the second half of the book, which is "increasingly self-devouring" (Eggers, 200). Toph is a somewhat shy kid, which

may have to do with both his parents dying early in his life and him consequently being raised by his siblings. He lives together with Dave and enjoys playing. Dave sees Toph as some sort of deposit for him to fill with whatever media he deems proper (Eggers, 49). These include things like the narrator's favourite music and novels. At the start of the novel Toph is only eight but already Dave gives him quite a lot of responsibility in the household, even though the household is a mess. Toph often needs to make the dinner and clean up, although this cleaning up is hardly ever actually done, thus leaving the house a mess. Toph is a rather closed person, who hardly ever discusses feelings and interests with Dave, and the picture of Toph is therefore limited.

Both Dave and Toph seem to be brimming with optimism and enthusiasm. This is probably due to the time in which they live, as the 1990s were a time of vast economic wealth in the United States. One of the effects of this prosperous economic climate was a low average unemployment rate of 4.2% (Whitley et al.). This low unemployment is reflected in the novel as neither Dave nor any of his friends have any difficulty in finding employment. Another important factor in the 1990s was the emergence of the Internet, although this does not feature in the novel. This is most probably due to the fact that the novel is set in the early 1990s and Dave and Toph were most probably not wealthy enough to afford personal computers. Dave does mention temping at the Pac Bell headquarters, meaning Packard Bell, a telecom and personal computer company. But the 1990s were not free of problematic issues. AIDS had entered public awareness in 1985 (Whitley et al.) and Dave himself repeats several times that he is certain he will die of AIDS soon. Also, the 1990s were a time in which America was involved in several wars. The first Gulf War took place around the same time as the novel is set. These wars and their implication, however, are not discussed in the novel. This probably also has to do with the way in which Dave's political views are guaranteed and need no emphasis. Despite the optimism both Dave and Toph are often nonchalant or

disinterested in what happens, the word ‘whatever’ most often being the answer to any question. It is this nonchalance which typifies the general mood of the characters from the 1990s, giving some credence to issue which Dave himself mentions in *Might Magazine*’s opening essay, namely that young people in the 1990s were “a generation [of] illiterate, uninspired, flannel-wearing ‘slackers’” (Eggers, 174).

The Modern Way:

Character description 2000s

The latest decade witnessed by Western society has seen many changes to the way we think and act. The decade was started with the Y2K-scare, which was followed quickly by the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York. This attack had a massive impact on Western society, as it was now under attack from within and hated from outside. The constant threat of terrorism, both the actual threat and the exaggerated threat as evoked by fear-mongering media, led to several wars and heavily increased security-checks in airports. All this greatly affects the youth in their lives and development. The portrait of youth in this decade is based on Joey and Jessica in Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*. They are Patty and Walter's children and as such their personalities are formed for a large part by the upbringing they receive. Jessica seems to have inherited Walter's level-headedness and is described by Walter's friend Richard to combine her parent's personalities (Franzen, 353) while Joey has Patty's competitive spirit. The portrait of these characters is, like the other portraits, a bit one-sided as only one of them, Joey, gets his story told directly. All information about Jessica is given indirectly through the viewpoint of other characters. However, as there are three accounts that do describe Jessica, her description is still quite detailed.

In contrast to his father, Joey is a firm believer in the capitalist free market ideology. Not that he is very ideological about it, but he desires to be independent and works to achieve this with the possibilities offered by the free market. This desire for independence, more specifically independence from his parents, is Joey's main motivation in all he does. The most important way in which he attempts to become independent is financially. Joey is a hard worker and is not averse to any amount of labour with which to earn his own money and thus lessen his dependence on his father. At a young age he realizes that entrepreneurship is the

best way to achieve independence as he starts up a project with his girlfriend and neighbor Connie. His relationship with Connie is a constant factor throughout his life, starting at a young age and continuing into marriage. She is always in his life and following his desire for independence she is the most prominent motivator for his actions. He later goes to college in a completely different state from his parents which makes tuition and boarding affordable through a complicated set-up. It is in university that he meets his best friend Jonathan, a friendship which helps Joey establish some connections which later help him to attain a higher degree of financial stability.

There are several flaws in Joey's personality which cause him a lot of anxiety, uncertainty and have him hurting people that are important to him. As already mentioned, his desire to be independent and his chosen path to achieving independence are painful to his father whose nature is idealistic. Joey is also uncertain about his feelings for Connie. He is not sure whether he loves her and wants to spend the rest of his life with her or whether she is part of a past he wants to disconnect himself from. He is also selfish in his quest for independence and most other goals he tries to achieve. His desire not to see his parents convinces him not to come home for Thanksgiving and Christmas, his absence on both occasions being painful for his mother and Connie. The distance he creates between himself and his parents, however, is a crucial part of his personality and help him to develop.

Joey is actively distancing himself from his parents; politically by challenging his father's democratic views, physically by moving in with the neighbors and religiously by researching and eventually embracing his Jewish background. Religion becomes a tool for Joey to lessen the parental binds with his mother, as she has been raised without a religion and has raised her children in the same way. Joey's desire to distance himself from his mother is remarkable as she has given him an extraordinary amount of attention. Joey is made aware of his being Jewish by his roommate Jonathan, who explains Jewish heritage and the

way Joey is Jewish through his maternal ancestry (Franzen, p. 252). Following this discovery Joey becomes interested in and starts researching his Jewish background, also as a way of connecting more with Jonathan and his family. Most important here is his desire to connect with Jonathan's sister Jenna, whom Joey has become infatuated with because of her apparently stunning good looks. This infatuation leads to Joey taking a vacation with Jenna, almost cheating on Connie, who is at that time his wife. A personal crisis and a moment of epiphany have Joey choosing Connie over Jenna, thus having him develop into a morally proper person as well as an honest worker. It is only after this development that he can connect with his parents and that he decides to make his marriage with Connie work.

An inescapable fact in the first decade of the third millennium is 9/11, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York City and the Pentagon in Langley, Virginia. Especially in the United States this was considered a national tragedy and a direct assault on their nation, but Western society as a whole was targeted by this attack. The Western lifestyle was under attack by Muslim fundamentalists, and they had hit the heart of this lifestyle. The attack was followed by an economic crisis, as a large portion of American international trade was done in the Twin Towers and the shock caused consumer confidence to decline sharply (recession.org). It was, however, also followed by new opportunities as the partially collapsed economy needed rebuilding. Also, as the American government declared a War on Terror which entailed military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq numerous military contracts became available. Joey accepts one such contract which involves finding spare parts for a type of truck intended for military use. This contract involves Joey having to invest a large sum of Connie's money and he almost fails to meet the contract requirements, which turns the contract into a test of character for Joey. The contract and people involved turn out to be a display of American corruption as Joey is told to fulfill his contract, despite Joey's moral objections to the actions this requires. Joey is troubled by this, but does as he is told and

informs the right people about the situation. This allows him to repay Connie, but as the earned money is immoral to Joey he decides to donate the rest of the money to his father's cause. This display of corruption in the government and in the economical circles that Joey desires to be a part of firmly shakes his beliefs and convinces Joey not to chase fast money-making schemes and instead finish his education and get a decent job. Joey had been struggling personally since 9/11 and feels like he lost his confidence. Overcoming his obstacles helps him to regain his confidence.

Jessica is a character of crucial importance to the development of most of the other main characters in the novel, but she is sadly underrepresented. The picture of her that is made up of other people's experiences with her show her to be a quiet, honest and level-headed person. Her mother, Patty, actually describes her as equal to her father in way of goodness (Franzen, 168). However, probably her most important quality is that she is self-sufficient, albeit in a different way from Joey. While Joey is self-sufficient by strongly desiring not to have to depend on other people, Jessica is independent without needing to actually distance herself from other people. One thing about Jessica, however, is that she is largely unremarkable. She is obviously very capable and smart, and the descriptions show her to be far from unattractive. But the way in which she keeps to herself and goes about her business almost makes her disappear from notice. She goes to college in Philadelphia, where she works hard in order to pass all her subjects. What the reader gets to see of her time in college is related by Patty in her autobiography. This episode is also characterized by Jessica being unremarkable. She studies hard, has a nice boyfriend and goes about her business by herself.

A moment when Jessica is shown more prominently is when she joins her father in his anti-growth project. She takes place in his team as a young person helping the group tries to reach young people. She is very bright and actively trying to help, although many of her

efforts are directed at opposing her father's new assistant, Lalitha, as Jessica is afraid of her parents breaking up. This shows Jessica to be a bit selfish as her personal wish for her parents to stay together is more important to her than the fact that the marriage is failing and Walter would probably be happier with Lalitha. She also seems to see Lalitha as competition as Walter used to consider her the most important smart, young female. The way in which Jessica behaves towards Lalitha shows the most negative part of her character. The only other flaw in Jessica's character is the emotional distance between her and her family. Although her connection to her father is stable and close, she does not connect well with either her mother or her brother. Even though Patty has done all she could to raise Jessica as well as she could, the personal connection was never there. Patty explains this to be "due partly to Jessica's self-sufficient nature and partly to Patty's overdoing things with Joey" (Franzen, 181). Jessica's lack of connection with her brother stems from differing opinions and acceptance of each other's independence.

When she finishes college Jessica seems to have some trouble in making her way in working life. Patty's autobiographical account of Jessica in her post-college time shows a more competitive side to her that makes mistakes. Suddenly Jessica seems far less perfect than she has been depicted up to that point. Following her parents' breakup Jessica does develop a much better relationship with her brother and her mother. On the whole Jessica seems, like Joey, to develop into a more complete and real person in later years following personal hardship. In Jessica's case, this hardship consists of a difficult job market and a problematic relationship as related by Patty (Franzen, p.533).

The early 2000s were characterized by economic struggle and intense fear of and war against terrorism. Both Joey and Jessica come in contact with these factors. Jessica struggles to find decent employment in an economically weak world, while Joey deals directly with America's increased military presence and its requirements. America's anxiety is also

reflected in Joey as he struggles to get to grips with his life and the people in it while the world changes drastically.

Being Different is Good:

Comparing character descriptions

When comparing the three different character descriptions it is important to note that two of the descriptions are from the same novel. Also, the character descriptions of the 1980s and the 2000s are based on a single family. As such there are some important similarities.

However, as we focus on the portrayal of youth it is the differences which are of importance. Most important are the differences caused by the respective time-periods, but some of these differences are also directly linked to personal character traits.

First of all, a look at the common ground within the three time-periods is needed. For the 1980s this seems to be a strong sense of optimism. Both Patty and Walter feel like they can make something of their life. Patty's complete devotion to her athletic career is already fruitful as it earned her a scholarship. Her plan to make a career of raising children (Franzen, 95) can be considered highly optimistic in a time when the constant threat of the Cold War was still present. Walter's strong political beliefs also show the optimism of believing that he can change the world into a better place. The sharp contrast between this naive optimism and the way politics work is made painfully clear when Patty describes the first time Walter meets her family and her mother, an active Democratic politician, appears to be hardly interested in Walter's ideas (Franzen, 121).

For the 1990s the common ground seems to be a persisting nonchalance in general. Dave is either bursting with confidence or drowning in doubt in his thoughts, but his actual actions and speech are largely disinterested. For instance, he is aware that the funding for the magazine is a way to make a name, but he and his friends take the easy way of simply funding the first edition using the money Dave already has. He also tells the reader of his desire to come across as nonchalant and cool when filmed (Eggers, p.243-245). Toph's

reactions are also often very disinterested. One example is the way he always wears a baseball cap, even though Dave keeps telling him that it smells of urine. When he tells his brother about a girl that was interested in him Toph's motivation for his actions amounts to "I didn't feel like it" (Eggers, 298). This contrasts quite sharply with the common factor for the 2000s characters. This latest decade seems blessed with young people that are willing to work hard and do so. Joey works hard and travels to Poland and Paraguay in order to earn money, but his sister Jessica works even harder. While Joey favours money-making schemes from an early age Jessica already starts young to work hard and fill her résumé. In her words, "I had about seventeen extracurricular activities. I was like Mother Teresa on speed" (Franzen, 356).

The descriptions show large differences between the three decades. The characters from both the 1980s and the 2000s are strongly focused on the future and see this positively. In the 1980s, Patty wants to make as much as possible of her athletic career until an injury ends it, and Walter's strong dedication to his political ideologies show his vision of the future. In the 2000s we have both Jessica and Joey working hard in order to secure their future; Joey through making money and Jessica by getting as much out of her education as possible. This is partly contrasted by the characters from the 1990s. Whether Toph even thinks about the future is uncertain, but Dave certainly does. The main point of the magazine is to rally the youth in order to change the world to a better place. However, as soon as the running of the magazine starts to become difficult they give up. There is not true dedication to changing the world like Walter has. Dave's vision of his own future is negative as he expects to die soon of either an accident or AIDS or another kind of illness (Eggers, 237). The 2000s show a combination of the two preceding decades. The 1990s self-centeredness remains, just no longer bound to nonchalance. Instead it is combined with a strong work-ethic.

In his *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema*

Timothy Shary investigates the way youth has been portrayed in films from the 1980s and 1990s. One of the more interesting observations he makes is that portrayal is almost always based on one of the five stereotypes established in the 1985 film *The Breakfast Club* (Murphy, 1). These stereotypes are the nerd, the delinquent, the rebel, the popular kid and the athlete. It is interesting to see that to some extent these stereotypes can also be applied to the literary portrayal of youth. The most obvious of these applications would be Patty, who perfectly fits the athlete-stereotype. She is a committed basketball player and goes to college on an athletic scholarship. Walter most closely resembles the nerd as he is smart and studies and works hard. He is a nice guy who sometimes disappears in the presence of his popular roommate. Dave is definitely a rebel in the way he starts the magazine to change the system. Jessica, like her father, is definitely a nerd. Her complete and quiet devotion to her education is her most prominent characteristic. Joey is more difficult to fit to a stereotype, but on the whole he fits the popular-stereotype. Although the reader hardly directly learns of his friends other than Jonathan, Jonathan's sister Jessa and Connie, he is often described as having a lot of friends. Only Toph is difficult to describe as a stereotype. This is probably due to his young age, although the limited description is also a factor.

An important absence in all three descriptions is technology. Considering that the 1990s were the start of the electronic age with the emergence of internet and sharp increase in computer-ownership it is expected that that particular kind of technology is not explicitly present in the 1980s description. The absence of technology in the 1990s description can be explained by remembering that the *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is set in the early 1990s, the main characters having no need or funds for a personal computer and internet only became accessible to the public in 1992. But the absence of technology in the description of the 2000s is striking as technology had by that time made itself an indispensable part of life. The only mention of the implications of technology is the fight

Jessica has with her father's assistant Lalitha, when Jessica states that the way Lalitha views technology is indicative of her older age and explains how the time of going online is crucial to a person's development. An explanation for the absence of technology is given by Timothy Shary in his book *Generation Multiplex* which researches the depiction of youth in contemporary American cinema. He notes that the disappearance of films in the 1990s about youth being highly skilled in technology in contrast to their parents. He explains that this may be caused by the fear of an older generation to become inferior to youth because of the youth's accelerated development through technology. Whether this is also the reason that Jonathan Franzen, who was born in 1957, also decides not to ascribe any importance to technology because as a member of the previous generation his understanding is lacking is not clear.

Anything is Possible:

Analyses through *Generation Me*

Jean Twenge's *Generation Me* is a study of contemporary youth of an unprecedented scale, using the results of surveys done from the 1950s onward to show the development of young people over the last decades. Her theory focuses mostly on the people born from the 1970s onward. She calls these people Generation Me, or GenMe, as the most dominant feature of this generation is a strong focus on the self. As Twenge sees it, Generation Me is both spoiled and cursed by the possibilities to enjoy their freedom. Generation Me is raised in the belief that they can do anything they want if they only put in the effort, but the demands of an increasingly competitive world are higher than just effort. Also, GenMe is raised with a strong focus on high self-esteem with parents and teachers trying not to criticise them. When they come to work in an office where criticism is being given GenMe can have trouble adjusting.

All of the described characters can be analysed using the theory and observations made in *Generation Me*. Patty and Walter, however, are not a part of Generation Me, as they were born in the 1960s. Yet, as parents they raise two profoundly GenMe children. Dave and Toph are both among the first wave of GenMe. Toph is around the same age as Joey and Jessica but at the time-periods from which the descriptions are taken he is still younger than them. Joey and Jessica are part of the established Generation Me having been born in the 1980s and growing up when exceptions to the parenting which creates GenMe were almost none-existent. In this way the three different pairs can be used to see the change from the previous generation, in this case Patty and Walter, to Generation Me, both the first wave as the well-defined later Generation Me.

One of the developments that Twenge describes to be typical of Generation Me is

what she terms “The Decline of Social Rules” (Twenge, 17). This means an increased belief that it is important to achieve your own potential and do what makes you feel good. Different studies have shown a development from conforming to a group to doing what seems correct despite what the group thinks (Twenge, 23). Individuality became more important and as a result people conformed less to accepted social etiquette. When looking at the pre-GenMe pair described this aspect proves an interesting factor for comparison. Patty’s basketball career depends heavily on being a constructive part of a group. However, her individuality was still important to her as the group was driven on individual competition and she prides herself on making second-team all-American. Walter’s focus is not on his individual needs but he feels no need to be part of a group. He does conform to society in most ways, only taking a radical stance politically. In the 1990s case of Dave, self-centeredness permeates every aspect of his life. The entirety of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* ties in with Twenge’s sub-header “The Worldwide Confessional” (Twenge, 36) in which she explains GenMe’s almost compulsive need to relate their personal stories. This applies to the writer Dave Eggers who writes the story of his life, but also to the novel’s narrator Dave Eggers who tells even the most personal details of his youth while being interviewed on camera (Eggers, 184-237). Toph is basically an extension of this as Dave raises him with the same values which he himself applies to his life. They both care little about the opinion of others so long as it causes them no harm. In the case of Joey and Jessica the focus on the self becomes less explicit, but it remains nevertheless. Joey is still focused almost entirely on himself and makes no effort to hide this. He wants to be independent and not to need others. However, he does work with a strong sense of morality and responsibility. This is a deviation from the trend described by Twenge as her depiction of GenMe feels that both morality and responsibility are secondary to the needs of the individual. Joey’s interest in learning more about his religion is also contrary to Twenge’s view of GenMe, as she describes religion as

another type of community that GenMe feels no need to conform to. Jessica is extremely self-focused, though not in a way that is obstructive to others. Her main quality is self-sufficiency. She keeps to herself and manages by herself and the opinion as well as the help of others is simply not required by her.

An important fact about Generation Me that Twenge analyses is the increase in anxiety and depression among Generation Me. The percentage of people who have suffered depression or have felt lonely or highly stressed in their life has increased dramatically in Generation Me. The difference with the 1980s description is obvious. Patty never feels ecstatically happy, yet she is never truly depressed in her college years. It is only after she has had children who have moved out that she suffers a depression. Although Walter has known periods of an oppressed mood he is never actually depressed. He does suffer from an anxiety for the future which ties in with his environmental ideologies. In his college years Walter needs to work a lot, he scores high on his subjects and makes time to spend with Patty, yet he does not seem stressed. Dave is of a different category. His mood swings back and forth between bursting with confidence and anxiety. He is slightly anxious about housing and education for Toph and thinks he will certainly die soon. However, his anxieties are of a very personal nature and as such of a small scale. He already has a college degree and plenty of money to live comfortably. On the whole his anxieties and stress are probably caused by the uncertainty of the future. Whether he is too young or really cares little about most things, fact is that Toph is neither depressed nor anxious or stressed. Joey and Jessica are both examples of GenMe being stressed and anxious. Joey's desire for independence is deeply rooted in uncertainty about the world. He wants to have control of his own life. The strains of paying for college and fulfilling the obligations of his contract cause Joey a lot of stress. On top of this he is experiencing trouble with his wife Connie, who has suffered a depression. Jessica is also under a lot of stress. Twenge mentions the altered standards of college admission as a

cause for stress. This certainly applies to Jessica, who had several extracurricular activities in her teen years to build her résumé and has suffered through what Patty describes as “the drama of her college applications” (Franzen, 181). Another factor which Twenge gives for the increased anxiety is the increased sense of threat. This fear, caused in a large part by the danger of terrorism, applies clearly to Joey, whose life is influenced a greatly by the attack on the Twin Towers.

Twenge states that a common sentiment in Generation Me is the belief that they are unable to influence things. There is a deeply rooted cynicism about society which creates a fatalistic mentality. This is different for the characters from the 1980s. Although Patty is not interested in politics she does consider equality-laws like Title Nine “just basic fairness” (Franzen, 94). As Patty was raised by a professional politician she does believe in the importance of voting. Walter is an even stronger opposite to the GenMe cynicism. He is politically active himself and does many things with the goal of changing the world. As became clear in the character descriptions of the 1990s there is little active societal interest in Dave and Toph. In Toph’s case this is most likely due to his young age. Dave’s politics become clear in the magazine. Like Walter, Dave believes that he can change the world, although he does not believe he can or needs to do this by himself. Outside of the magazine there is nothing substantial in Dave’s life with regard to society and politics. The characters in the 2000s description resemble Twenge’s Generation Me more, but the fatalistic mentality is still absent. Jessica is not explicitly interested in politics, but her personal preferences are clearly inspired by her father. The idea that her influence will not change anything is unknown to her as she even joins in her father’s campaign of an anti-growth ideology. Joey is very different from Jessica. His political ideas oppose his father’s directly. Also, his preferred career is based on political connections he makes through his friend Jonathan. The nation’s politics are of great importance and interest to him. Both Jessica and Joey differ greatly from

Twenge's Generation Me.

A typical development described in *Generation Me* is what Twenge calls "The Equality Revolution" (180). Over the last decades equality between sexes and races has increased dramatically. This change has happened over a long period of time, but Twenge states that Generation Me is the first generation to grow up with this increased equality. The change is evident with Patty who gets an athletic scholarship because of Title Nine, one of the more important laws to increase equality between sexes. Walter is even an active and outspoken feminist. The increased equality considering races, however, is not present in the description of the 1980s. The next decade, however, saw at least awareness of racial variety. Dave's magazine holds two photo-shoots, and both times the editors are aware of the need for sexual and racial variety. The presence of a girl from India at the office is also a source of great pride for Dave. Lalitha, Walter's assistant, is also of Indian ethnicity, but that is a fact of minor importance, as it never directly affects anything. Again, Toph's position in this point is unclear probably due to his young age. Joey and Jessica have little to do with racial or sexual diversity. For both characters this is simply not an issue and as such their views are unclear. This does, however, concur with Twenge's statement that the increased equality is accepted as a fact by Generation Me.

Conclusion

After taking a good look at the main characters that make up the portrayed pairs in the three decades of interest, the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, a pattern emerges. This pattern becomes most obvious when designating the main characteristic of each decade and comparing these. The most important characteristic for the characters from the 1980s was optimism, for the 1990s it was nonchalance or disinterest and for the 2000s it was dedication to work. These main characteristics are indicative of one pattern of development in the characters. It seems the optimism in the 1980s became a given in the 1990s, but in the 2000s it became clear to people that good things come from hard work and not from simply expecting them.

Other interesting patterns emerge through a close inspection of the depictions using Jean Twenge's *Generation Me*. There is definitely a development towards selfishness, but it is not as extreme as Twenge makes it out to be. Also, there is an increase in the amount of stress and anxiety experienced by the characters. This ties in with Twenge's theory. Although Twenge also claims that political involvement has decreased considerably over the last decades the depictions of young people show a different pattern as all three discussed decades know plenty political involvement. The move towards equality is present in an odd shift as the characters from 1980s have feministic sentiments and the characters from the 1990s are very sensitive to racial and sexual variety. However, the characters from the 2000s have no interest in equality-politics. This could be due to the factual reality of equality as it is. More likely it is the result of the self-centeredness and the fact that equality-politics bear no significance to them. This explanation is also in line with Twenge's *Generation Me*.

The extent to which Jean Twenge's *Generation Me* is a reflection of actual society is open for debate. However, as it is based on the analysis of an extensive amount of survey-data it can be seen as such. By comparing the depiction of youth in contemporary American

literature to the image of youth given by Twenge it becomes clear that the depictions of youth in fiction are often different from the image given by *Generation Me*. This has most likely been done to serve the writers' purposes which can differ from service to the main story to the improving of the author's or character's image, as is most likely the case in Eggers' work, it being largely autobiographical. The depictions in literature do comply with *Generation Me* to a certain extent, which could make the differences part of the characters' individual personalities. In this way the characters are easy to relate to for young readers and still unique and interesting individuals. The main factor which returns in all depictions of youth, however, is that they are one of the most important parts of society, whether as being the future or as being the bringers of change. As long as societies remain, youth is here to stay.

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