

# The loss of identity portrayed in a range of literature essay



Report: Loss of Identity portrayed in a range of literature For my report I chose to look at the loss of Identity portrayed in a range of different literature. The texts that I chose to study were: ' Wide Sargasso Sea' by Jean Rhys, ' The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde' by Robert Louis Stevenson, ' I am not Esther' by Fleur Beale, ' The Importance of Being Earnest' by Oscar Wilde and ' Face Off' directed by John Woo and written by Mike Werb and Michael Colleary. In all five texts that I studied the theme " loss of identity" was apparent, and in every case the main characters are the ones that experience a loss of identity.

In ' The Importance of Being Earnest' and ' The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde' the main characters lead a double life which causes them to forget about who they really are. However, in ' Wide Sargasso Sea' the main character goes mad and then loses her identity. The main character in ' I am not Esther' is forced to change her identity and starts to lose her true identity along the way. The same goes for the two main characters in ' Face Off' that swap identities and are so wound up in pretending to be each other that they lose their identities.

Throughout my research I will be answering three different questions; to what extent does setting cause a loss of identity? , how is symbolism used to explore the theme? , and how do others influence a loss of identity? To what extent does setting cause a loss of identity? Both ' The Importance of Being Earnest' and ' The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde' were set in London, ' The Importance of Being Earnest' in the 1890's whereas ' The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde' was set in the 1870's. In London, the

members of society that were in the upper classes had a great deal of pressure to uphold their responsibilities pushed onto them.

The gentlemen of the 1800's had a reputation to keep intact and because of the pressure to follow their duty, honour, and responsibilities Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff from 'The Importance of Being Earnest' created alter egos that allowed them to escape their responsibilities and ignore the boundaries of being upper class men. For Jack, his troubled younger brother Earnest allows him regular visits to town to see how his brother is. "When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people." This quote, spoken by Jack as Earnest, portrays that setting as a big part of how people act and behave. It also tells us that Jack only comes to town to amuse his self and not have to worry about anyone else. As for Algernon, his dear friend Bunbury who is ill accounts for all of Algernon's trips to the country. Robert Louis Stevenson describes Henry Jekyll in a gentleman like way, his home is well-kept, grand and beautiful whereas Edward Hyde is portrayed as being much more animalistic and his home is shabby and neglected. I believe that Jekyll and Hyde's "homes" are a reflection of their personalities and that the appearance of both has an influence on the person (i. e. they are symbolic). If Edward Hyde's home was kept in the same condition as Henry Jekyll's then I think Hyde would not be as evil. However, as he is the complete opposite of Jekyll it would mean, most likely, that Jekyll would not be as much of a gentleman as he is portrayed to be. In 'Wide Sargasso Sea', Antoinette lives in a town that is ruled by white people but because Antoinette and her family are of a Creole descent and act high and mighty neither the whites nor the blacks approve

of them. Antoinette wants to be accepted by people and because the town isolates her family she becomes confused about her identity. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass. " This is not dialogue but is what Antoinette is thinking, it shows that she wishes she was Tia, who knows who she is (i. e. a black woman), because then she would have her own racial identity. It implies that Tia is conflicted about what she does. I think that because Antoinette and her family are isolated by the town and do not really have any friends that this is what caused Antoinette to start losing her identity.

I believe that setting has a major influence on Kirby Greenland from ' I am not Esther' as the environment that she is placed in is something that she is not used to and reacts in a negative way. When Kirby is forced to join The Children of the Faith her relatives try change everything about her - her name, appearance, attitude and even the way she talks. " The women of our faith all have biblical names. As do the men... We have given you the name Esther. " This quote explains why Kirby's relatives want to change her but they don't have the right to.

In John Woo's film ' Face Off' Sean Archer, FBI agent, is fixated with catching Castor Troy, terrorist; because of their fixation with hurting each other they have both inflicted damage to each other's personal lives. When the FBI convinces Sean to go undercover as Castor Troy, literally, everything changes. As Sean is now in prison with Castor's face he is expected to act like Castor Troy. The environment that Sean is in is not a good one as it forces him to do things he wouldn't normally do which, in time, causes him to forget who he is.

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Meanwhile, Castor Troy now has Sean's face and is walking around the FBI office learning about things that a terrorist should not know. I think that in this movie the setting and environment that Sean and Castor are put into are to blame for the loss of their identity. I think this because if they had not swapped faces then neither Sean nor Castor would have to act like someone they are not and they would still be 100% certain about who they are. Although Sean does not completely forget who he is he does swap between himself and Castor Troy frequently enough to make him confused about his identity.

How is symbolism used to explore the theme? Symbolism can be used in many ways to help the reader get a better view on what point the author is trying to get across. In 'Wide Sargasso Sea' Jean Rhys uses the colour red to symbolise Antoinette's Creole identity and femininity. "I will write my name in fired red, Antoinette Mason, nee Cosway, Mount Calvary Convent, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1839." Using "fire red" to write her name portrays that Antoinette embraces her identity at the beginning of the novel. The two last names, however, portray Antoinette's split identity; who she was before her mother married and who she is now.

Another symbol used to explore the theme is the looking-glass. At the end of the novel Rochester ensures that there are no mirrors in her room, this is his way of depriving Antoinette of an identity to call her own. "There is no looking-glass here and I don't know what I am like now..." Being isolated and not having the privilege of being able to see yourself shows Antoinette's overall absence of her identity. This isolation causes her to go mad and in

the last pages of the novel we read her “ downfall” as she loses her identity and takes revenge on Rochester for depriving her.

In ‘ The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde’ the symbol that Robert Louis Stevenson uses to explore the theme is passageways. The story starts with a door in a bad neighbourhood that passer-by’s wonder what goes on behind it and as the story progresses we find out that the door leads to Dr Jekyll’s laboratory. The passage from “ the door” to the laboratory acts as a passage between Jekyll’s world and Hyde’s world. It shows that they are the only ones who use it because they are the only ones that know about it.

This symbolises the fact that Dr Jekyll is the only one that crosses from normality to evil and back. The two alter egos that Jack and Algernon create in ‘ The Importance of Being Earnest’ symbolise the pressure placed on men in the 1890’s to keep to their duties and not disrespect their family’s honour. Earnest Worthing (Jack’s alter ego) is anything but earnest as he does not even exist, he is fictional. Their alter egos allow them to live a lie while seemingly upholding the standards of Victorian society while really misbehaving and not having to deal with any of the consequences.

The alter egos also symbolise the Victorian society’s real values and beliefs as they did not value honesty or responsibility for the under-privileged lower classes of society, but only truly cared about money and status. It is fitting that their double lives portray how shallow the Victorian’s real worries are. In ‘ I am not Esther’ symbols that Fleur Beale uses to explore the theme, or rather lack of, are mirrors, magazines, TV, radio and newspapers. The lack of these objects portrays how Kirby has no knowledge of the outside world or of

her appearance. We keep our thoughts turned to the Lord. " Kirby's Aunt Naomi explains to her why they don't have TVs, radios, magazines or newspapers. The faith do not believe in TV, radio, newspapers or magazines as they believe that news about life outside the faith will corrupt the children and threaten their religion. How do others influence a loss of identity?

Antoinette's husband Rochester in ' Wide Sargasso Sea' influences a loss of identity by isolating her from her friends and family and herself. He takes her back to England and locks her away so that she cannot hurt anyone. " Bertha is not my name.

You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. "

This quote portrays how Antoinette has realised that her husband is not trying to annoy her but is actually trying to change her and " stamp" the madness out of her; instead, he just makes her madder and rapidly, she goes from being " normal" to not knowing who she is and being a mad woman. In ' I am not Esther' her relatives influence is the main cause of Kirby losing her identity. Her Uncle does not give her an option when she joins the faith, he forces her to become like him and his family by changing her appearance, name and the way she talks. I'm not Esther. " This quote is Kirby's " catch phrase" in the novel; the use of abbreviations shows that her Uncle has not succeeded in changing her identity yet. However, near the end of the novel, before Kirby runs away from the faith, she starts saying, " I am not Esther. " This quote is extremely significant as it portrays that she has stopped trying to fight with Uncle Caleb and has let him win. When Kirby runs away she makes sure that every day she has something to do, this is her way of keeping her mind off Esther and the faith.

In 'The Importance of Being Earnest' a loss of identity is influenced, not by one particular person, but by the people of the Victorian society as a whole. As I have mentioned, numerous times already, the pressure of having to uphold your duties and responsibilities became too much for Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff. This pressure led to the creation of alter egos that would allow them to escape their responsibilities and behave how they wanted. When Cecily and Gwendolen find out that they are both engaged to Ernest Worthing the truth comes out about Jack's and Algernon's misadventures.

However, it turns out that Jack's alter ego is his true identity, and this portrays that our alter egos aren't all that different from our actual identities. "I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest." This quote is a pun between earnest, the adjective, and Jack's 'new' name, Ernest. Jack's, now Ernest's honesty is questioned because throughout the play he was truthful about his name being Ernest but he also lied when saying he had a younger brother Ernest.

Jack and Algernon semi lose their identities at the end of the play as it turns out that their whole lives have been a lie as they are actually brothers. In the case of Dr Jekyll losing his identity he also felt pressured by society to uphold his responsibilities and so he took a potion that made him transform into his identity double Mr Hyde, who is the complete opposite of him. "This, then is the last time... that Henry Jekyll can think his own thoughts or see his own face in the glass." The pressure of having to keep Hyde's true identity a secret becomes too much for Jekyll and he ends up committing suicide.



In the film 'Face Off' Sean Archer and Castor Troy are influenced by each other to a loss of identity. Pretending to be each other influenced them to think like the "enemy" and become them which caused them to forget about who they truly are. The film ends happily for Sean Archer when he kills Castor Troy and gets his face and family back. "My scar, the one near my heart. This old bullet wound. I won't be needing it anymore." This quote portrays that the same influence that caused his loss of identity also influenced him in realising that Castor Troy killing his son was an honest mistake.

Sean finally has closure now that Castor is dead and can move on with his life. In conclusion, the theme loss of identity is portrayed in a range of literature in many different ways throughout the texts I chose to study for my research. To a certain extent I believe that setting causes a loss of identity because, in most cases - 'Wide Sargasso Sea', 'Face Off' and 'I am not Esther' - the main characters were taken out of their comfort zone and forced into an environment that they were not used to.

However, in 'The Importance of Being Earnest' and 'The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde', the main characters felt pressured by society to uphold their duties, honour and responsibilities and thus lead them to create alter egos that allowed them to escape the boundaries that society has on them and do whatever they feel. The authors used symbolism in many unique ways to explore the theme and help the reader understand it more. In 'I am not Esther' Fleur uses the lack of TV, radio, newspapers and mirrors to portray how Kirby is isolated from the outside world and herself.

The alter egos in 'The Importance of Being Earnest' symbolises the pressure that society places on men in the 1980's to keep to their honour. Also, in 'The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde' the passageway between Jekyll's lab and Hyde's home symbolises how Jekyll's is the only person that can cross from normality to evil and back, but eventually it becomes too much and he kills himself. Others influence a loss of identity in all five texts; society in 'The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde' and 'The Importance of Being Earnest', the "enemy" in 'Face Off', Rochester in 'Wide Sargasso Sea' and the Faith in 'I am not Esther'.

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