Identity Crisis

The main theme in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s, “Young Goodman Brown,” and Celeste Ng’s, “Little Fires Everywhere,” is the theme of identity. Identity can be what a person sees themselves as, who they are, or even their name. Identity can be so many things but it all boils down to who is a person. Identity is tricky to, ironically, identify or determine because someone can have multiple identities to different people. For example a person can be a son to a mother, a savior to someone, and a villain to another. Both of these stories explore the identities of its characters and how complicated the question of, “Who am I?” can be.

“Little Fires Everywhere,” is a novel by Celeste Ng and it focuses on a real-life neighborhood called Shaker Heights. The characters consist of the Richardsons, Warrems, McCulloughs and Chinese woman named Bebe. Mia Warren and Pearl Warren move into a house owned by the Richardsons who are a family consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Richardson, their son Moody, their other son Trip, their daughter Lexie, and their other daughter Izzy. The first half of the story is basically just Pearl fitting in with the Richardsons and Izzy fitting in more with Mia, the mother of Pearl. Then the second half of the story focuses on a family called the McCulloughs trying to win custody of Chinese baby from a mother who couldn’t take care of her when she gave her up. The story focuses on how living in Shaker heights changes Pearl, the antagonism between Mrs. Richardson and Mia, and the battle for the custody for the Chinese
baby between Bebe, the mother of the baby wanted by the McCulloughs, and the McCulloughs. Each aspect of the story focuses on a crisis of identity of the characters.

The most obvious case of identity crisis is with Mia Warren because Warren isn’t even her real last name, its name of her dead brother. Mia has lived a complicated life where she wanted to be an artist against her parent’s wishes and even became a surrogate mother to pay for college. That all changes when she decides she wants to keep the baby for her own and run off because she saw herself as the mother of the baby instead of just as the surrogate and couldn’t bear to part with Pearl. She even changed her name, her identity, when she ran away because she wanted to leave her old life behind her and to try and start a new life with her daughter. This comes back to bite her when Mrs. Richardson tries to figure out who Mia really is because Mrs. Richardson thinks that Mia is having a negative effect on her family, specifically her daughter Izzy. Izzy is also another interesting case of identity crisis because it is often implied that she doesn’t even feel like she is a part of her family. Izzy is often described as a sort of wild child in the Richardson family and she occasionally acts out, this is most evident when she pranks a teacher by locking her out of the bathroom for just insulting someone in class who Izzy thought didn’t deserve it. Izzy prefers to spend time with Mia because Mia doesn’t try to micromanage her life like Mrs. Richardson does. Mrs. Richardson only micromanages Izzy because when Izzy was born, she was born rather weak and it was touch and go with her condition. Izzy’s crisis of faith stems from the fact that she doesn’t see herself of the daughter of Mrs. Richardson but would rather be the daughter of Mia because she feels more connected to Mia because Mia doesn’t try to control Izzy like Mrs. Richardson. The inverse can be seen with Pearl who at the start of the story was fine with her mother but the reader can see some disdain for her mother because Mia kept moving around and that really messed up Pearl’s social life because she would
make friends and immediately have to leave them when she and Mia had to move across the country once again. But as stated previously, the first half of the story focuses on Pearl becoming closer to Richardsons. As Pearl gets closer to them, she gets distant from her mother to the point where she wishes the Richardsons would take her in. She even considers running away to them at a point in the story. She also lets Lexie use her name when Lexie gets an abortion (Ng 181). It's interesting to see Izzy and Pearl kind of swap places in a way, with the other trying to replace one another or in a sense, try to swap identities.

Then there is the battle for custody of May Ling or Mirabelle depending on whose perspective it is from. A short summary of the battle is that a woman named Bebe Chow gave birth to a baby girl that she couldn’t take care of because of her situation at the time so she gave her up for adoption. The McCulloughs are family who can’t conceive so they adopt Bebe’s baby to fill that empty spot in their family. Mia knows Bebe from work and tells her about her baby being in the McCulloughs custody and Bebe immediately tries to see her. She is turned away and it becomes a big public spectacle that ends in a court battle that Bebe loses. Bebe steals the baby and runs away to China while the McCulloughs adopt a baby from China so they can’t have their child stolen again. The court case brings up an interesting question, “What is a mother?” The question is directly stated but all points boil down to what is a mother. There are two easy answers to the question, one is that a mother is a person who gives birth to a person and the other is a person who raises another person. This situation has no clear answer though and it mostly comes from the fact that both sides are correct. Bebe has a right to raise the child because biologically the child in question is hers, while the McCulloughs also have a valid claim because they are more financially prepared and they did adopt her legally. The case is yet again another crisis of identity, and that crisis is what is a mother.
Nathaniel Hawthorne’s, “Young Goodman Brown,” is a short story about a man named Goodman Brown who goes out for a walk that turns into a living nightmare. On his walk he meets a man who is implied to be the devil while people from his town, the town of Salem that is, come out of the woodworks as witches and other beings of evil. It all culminates in the end when he is brought to a ceremony where his wife is being indoctrinated into a demonic or satanic ceremony. Then he wakes up on the forest floor changed by what he saw, not knowing whether it was real or not. He lives the rest of his days as an angry man who doesn’t trust or like any of his neighbors again. This is the story of how man lost his faith, in more than one way.

Goodman itself is a title, an identity, given to the male head of a household. Immediately this story has religion as one of its main elements, and an interesting thing about religion is that it can a person’s identity. Someone can live their whole life seeing their religion as who they are because it affects every part of their life down to who they interact with and their actions. Goodman’s faith even has a personification in this story in the shape of his wife, Faith. Its rather blunt but it very clear about what it means in the story. In the beginning, Faith is seen as beautiful, innocent, and even a little naïve. As the story progresses and as Brown is tormented he finally sees his wife at the end and the reader can see the moment that Goodman Brown loses his faith, both literally and metaphorically. The events of the story actually change Goodman Brown as a person, it changes his identity into “a stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man,”(Hawthorne 357). The identity of his neighbors are also thrown into question during the whole episode in the woods, it brings up an more interesting aspect of identity and that is the perspective of identity. What that implies is that people are seen differently by other people as demonstrated in the introduction, one man’s savior is another’s villain. This story explores that concept wonderfully by taking normally non-threatening people such as priests,
heads of town, and even nice old women and turning them into cult leaders, witches, and horrible people who want to bring about the coming of the devil. The story brings up the question of “Do I really know the people in my life?” Most of the time that answer is a resounding no, and that’s not a slight but merely a saddening truth. Most people tend to keep their darkest secrets to themselves and one of the only true ways to see a person for who they truly are is to see what they do in the dark, or what they do when no one is looking. This story plays with the idea of that by making that nice lady who passes out flowers into a horrible witch who sacrifices people to her own gains.

Both stories bring up the concept of identity, Ng focuses on the family aspect of identity while Hawthorne focuses on the personal aspect of identity. Both are two very different aspects but are more similar than most would think. Both have a resounding effect on a person as an individual and how they act. These stories both wonderfully explore how a crisis of identity can affect a person and how they act whether it be from a decent man to one who is spiteful and weary or to a daughter who feels like they are in the wrong family.
Works Cited
