
Identity Change of Characters in 'Mother Night'

In today's society, almost anything is possible to achieve, a fact that makes it so that nothing is ever as it appears. Things change constantly, whether we agree with such changes or not. This idea is especially notable in the people of the modern world, who undergo phases in life when they change who they have become to then truly discover who they were meant to be. In Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night*, there are several characters that create various identities for themselves for various reasons. It is imperative to understand why characters pretend to be something they are not in order to understand how it can affect someone internally, and how becoming fixated with remaining loyal to your country or leaving behind an old life can lead to a character's demise.

Howard Campbell was the prime character that had dual identities. His intentions can be immediately questioned because he grew up in Germany, and serving as an American spy never made sense because he was no longer familiar with the American culture. This is supported when Campbell's "Blue Fairy Godmother" Frank Wirtanen confuses him for being an Englishman due to the way he spoke. Campbell's change in identities challenged his way of living. Prior to becoming an American spy, Campbell lived a simple happy life with his wife Helga. Nevertheless, his dual identities challenged his beliefs because he had no political stance. With the war coming, Campbell would eventually have to pick a side. Wirtanen supports this by saying, "This war isn't going to let anybody stay in a peaceful trade." (Vonnegut 38) Whether he wanted to accept it or not, Campbell was eventually going to be involved in the war because he was associating with the Nazis. As the book progresses, the line between American spy and German propagandist is blurred. It became difficult to know which Campbell was authentic. In trying to leave behind memories of the war (and the disappearance of his wife), Campbell wanted to let go of what he had done in the past. It became such a central focus that it led to his pending suicide. At the end of the book, Frank Wirtanen proved Campbell's innocence, but he wanted nothing to do with it. He stated, "What froze me was the fact that I had absolutely no reason to move in any direction. What had made me move through so many dead and pointless years was curiosity. Not even that had flickered out." (Vonnegut 232) This demonstrates how Campbell was disgusted with himself and did not wish to continue living with the past that haunted him. As a result, he had no other choice but to commit suicide so that he could live in peace with himself.

Iona Potapov, alias George Kraft, was another character that had an alternate personage. Campbell became best friends with George Kraft because they were neighbors and they shared their sorrows. Kraft made Campbell believe that he had also lost his wife. Since Campbell was still grieving about his wife, Kraft was the favorable company. Although Kraft was a Russian

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agent he grew to like Campbell and was willing to assist him by whatever means possible, even if in the end he was going to hand him over to the Russians. Nevertheless, he was also learning to let go of some things in his life because he was dedicated to fighting for the cause of the war. When Campbell found out that Kraft was an agent he said, "With a few well-chosen words you have wiped me out. How much poorer I am in this minute than I was in the minute before!" (Vonnegut 197) Campbell was genuinely hurt when he found out that Kraft was going to betray him and he did not deny it when Campbell made it obvious to Resi and him that he knew what they were up to. Kraft's biggest downfall is that he also became a confusing character due to the way he supported Campbell. In not fully revealing his past or his purpose for being a Russian agent, readers must assume that he was simply a traitor that had the interest of his country at heart. Such a fixation led to his arrest.

Resi Noth was a complex character both as herself and as her sister Helga. She went about becoming Helga because she wanted to be with the man she loved, even if it meant making him believe temporarily that she was his long lost wife. She also wanted to leave behind her past; in becoming Helga, Resi was able to forget about the difficult life she led once she ran away from Berlin. Resi explained to Campbell why she impersonated her sister by saying, "I could be Resi Noth, cigarette-machine operator with no relatives anywhere. Or I could be Helga Noth, actress wife of a handsome, adorable, brilliant playwright in the U.S.A. You tell me which one should I have been?" (Vonnegut 138) Resi did not want Campbell to judge her because her only focus was in forgetting about how she had lost all those that she cared about. With her sister's disappearance, she was able to recuperate a part of her by being with her husband even if she already loved him. Regardless, she became too fixated in wanting to obtain Campbell's love. Such an obsession is what led to her also committing suicide. She states, "Then tell me what to live for- anything at all. It doesn't have to be love'." (Vonnegut 221) Once she knew that Campbell gave up on love, she no longer knew what to live for. Since she had already lost it all she concluded that she fulfilled her purpose and was free to die.

Characters that create multiple personages for themselves will always have various motives, whether it is for a change or wishing to make amends for their mistakes. Nevertheless, this is something society still does. It might not be as drastic as literally creating a new identity for yourself, but the need for reinvention is the same. The important message to get out of creating a new identity for yourself is that the past always catches up to us. As much as we try to forget who we were, we must still keep a part of ourselves genuine before we recreate ourselves. It is imperative that we make sure we know who we are before we change ourselves because, if not, that new persona can take over our lives.

Works Cited

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Mother Night*. New York: Dial Press Trade Paperbacks, 1966. Print.

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