

Independent Study Unit

Log 1 ✓

On Miriam Toews'

A Complicated Kindness

Leigh Cogar

Ms. Ellery

ENG 2DB

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This town is so severe. And silent. It makes me crazy, the silence. I wonder if a person can die from it. There's an invisible force that exerts a steady pressure on our words like a hand to an open, spurting wound. The town office building has a giant filing cabinet full of death certificates that say choked to death on his own anger or suffocated from unexpressed feelings of unhappiness. Silentium. The only thing you hear at night is semis barreling down the highway carting drugged animals off to be attacked with knives. Do not make eye contact with those cows. People here just can't wait to die, it seems. It's the main event. The only reason we're not all snuffed at birth is because that would reduce our suffering by a lifetime. My guidance counsellor has suggested to me that I change my attitude about this place and learn to love it. But I do, I told her. Oh that's rich, she said. That's rich.

Pages 4-5 (First page passage)

The protagonist Nomi paints a clear picture of the world by exaggerating the desperation and silence of her town, saying that people have suffocated from the inability to express their unhappiness. ✓

The word "severe" is used in the description of her environment, which could mean both serious and dangerous, due to what behaviour is acceptable and being pushed over the edge by these expectations. A metaphor is also used, comparing the towns peoples' voices or words to blood being held back by a hand. Blood is used as a motif in this novel to echo the theme of death. ✓

→ What about death?
Death is a major idea in the novel. It is seen as a moment of relief that everyone seems to rush towards, mainly due to the fact that the characters suffer in their Mennonite town. ✓

Nomi is regarded as sarcastic and doesn't respect the town and rules. This is largely due to her broken family situation and the longing for excitement in her teenage years.

Context:

Before this passage, the protagonist Nomi has just been introduced. She mentions the location of her house but does not go into great detail about the setting. It is learnt that “half of [their] family” (1) is missing; her mother, Trudie, and sister, Tash, left three years ago and their whereabouts are unknown. Nomi reflects on an uncomfortable memory of her neighbours slaughtering a chicken in front of her and her mother. As the blood splatters on the white snow, Trudie describes it as “beautiful,” (3) and exclaims, “Who knew it could be so easy” (3). Nomi wonders whether she meant easy to make art, kill a chicken, or to die. ✓ This dramatic and twisted opening sets up this passage, in which Nomi expresses her view of the world and relates the image of the slaughtered animal to the novel’s strong theme of death. This is the first opportunity to hear her opinion about the town she lives in and why her world has been turned somewhat upside down. After the passage, it is finally revealed that the characters are Mennonites, and according to Nomi, “the most embarrassing sub-sect of people to belong to if you’re a teenager” (5). Therefore, this passage is significant to what follows in the work because it poses a question that can be answered in the next paragraph. As the protagonist describes her unusual environment, the question of what culture or background she is from appears only to be answered immediately after. More about this culture and its history is explained hereafter. All in all, the passage serves the purpose of defining the view of the world in a more personal way by the protagonist. ✓ Rather than learning more about how the setting would be described from an outsider’s perspective, there is the opportunity to understand the mood and how Nomi interacts with her environment. ✓ After gaining this knowledge, it is easier to understand the possible motives of her mother and sister for leaving as well as why Nomi might commit some of the actions or have some of the same urges she does in the future. ✓

Significance:

The text gives a strong vision of the setting in terms of mood and how the character feels about it. The town is often described as silent and every day seems to pass in the same way. The Mennonite town never advances and the people have the same experiences apart from the rest of society. The lack of outside interaction and adventure is what creates the silence. People are described as having “choked to death on [their] own anger or suffocated from unexpressed feelings of unhappiness” (4). This exaggeration intensifies the desperation of the townspeople, restricted by how they are expected to behave and not able to voice their frustrations. A metaphor is used to compare this situation to a hand covering an “open, spurting wound” (4). The desperation is seen as the blood that is controlled by the hand, which represents the expectations or rules. The blood may be seen as the *substance* of a person or their inner self that can not be accepted in Mennonite society. *Nice* The word “severe” is used in this passage to describe the town. This is an interesting word choice since it could be determined in many ways. One meaning is that the town is strict due to the Mennonite people having to keep up their ‘good’ reputation; “you fall into line or you fall” (10). Nomi is a violator of the rules or a rebel. In her opinion, the town is completely strict and leaves little room for freedom. Severe could also mean dangerous. In a way, the overbearing restrictions are dangerous to the townspeople, making them rebel or go insane from trying to cope in this environment. The character also makes up a word, “*Silentium*,” to name the condition people acquire from the silence. This is another way the extremity of the situation is exaggerated. *Very good!*

From the description, it is clear that Nomi is not fond of her home town and the culture she is part of. She hates the silence and wonders “if a person can die from it” (4). Since the teenage years are about experiencing new things and making decisions for one’s own self, she

longs for these opportunities but is held back by her old fashioned and strict society. The silence is even more extreme for Nomi because she only has her father left. Her mother and sister left and they were the only members of her family to understand her desires. They themselves felt trapped and had to leave to experience the outside world. When advised to learn to love her home, Nomi says she does, but even her counsellors can tell this is false. She is seen as a sarcastic individual with a special disregard for the expectations placed on her.

The main idea ~~tho~~ far in the novel is first introduced in detail in this passage. The concept of death being “the main event” (5) and something to look forward to, is reoccurring in the novel. Death is seen as the best part of life and most people would like it to come sooner. Although Nomi’s dad doesn’t say it directly, it is obvious that he would be quite content with dying. During an electrical storm he decides to go clean their roof and Nomi wonders if he purposely waited for the storm “before going up on the roof” (82). Nomi’s father is a lost soul after his wife left and doesn’t have much ambition or will to live for a long time.

Some symbols are mentioned frequently throughout the work, which allude to the idea of death. Both blood and slaughtered animals represent the difference between life and death. First of all, blood was seen from the slaughtered chicken in one of the opening scenes. Trudy compared the blood splattered snow to artwork. Similarly, Nomi still has smears of blood from a bike accident on her wall that “[resemble] the Mandarin language” (88) or a type of wall art. It reminds her that at the moment, she is “*not* bleeding from [her] face” (89). While the chicken’s blood reminds people that death is easy, Nomi has a different opinion of death. Her blood reminds her that she is not dead yet and still has time left in her life. Time that she has the opportunity to spend fulfilling her teenage dreams. This gives her hope that she may get these opportunities some day. Furthermore, the image of slaughtered animals is brought to Nomi’s

mind often. The traditional job for a young Mennonite is at a slaughterhouse. Nomi can't stand the thought of having to do this job in a few years and potentially for the rest of her life. She says by the time she is forty she will have spent so many years chopping heads that "It'll be time" (85). The reminder of her fate lies in the image of the slaughtered animal and this banishes any hope she has for her future. This is perhaps the reason why she says not to look at the cows in this passage because they are just a reminder of a dreaded fate and death. All in all, these two symbols represent the idea of death, life and how fate plays into them.

The passage is written in a mostly informal manner. This is to highlight the sarcastic or exaggerating personality of the protagonist Nomi. Many sentences are divided as if she is just saying what comes to mind and to add drama. For example, instead of saying the town is severe and silent in the same sentence, it is separated and uses "and" at the beginning of a sentence, which is not correctly written. She also makes up the word "*Silentium*." This writing style makes the content seem more personal, as if Nomi is actually speaking out loud.

In conclusion, the author intended for this passage to embed questions and concerns about the environment this young woman is growing up in. These questions are answered in the following paragraphs. The passage certainly grabs attention and introduces alarming ideas about life and death. I chose this passage because it startled me that this young girl speaks so much about death. It is so contrary to what I believe in my world; I value a long life over death. It made me wonder how this lifestyle could be so drastically different to make death a beautiful ending to such suffering.

Very well said.

I lay on my bed thinking about Travis, about his large-pored green hands and his favourite combinations and the way he always reminded me to signal when I turned. Nomi, he said, you just need to wake up to the fact that other people need to know where you're going. But there's nobody behind me. I told him. And he said, reassuringly, that someday there may be.

I put on Tash's Keith Jarrett record and watched the needle wobble around and around, six inches from my head. I liked the way he moaned when he played the piano. I decided to like anybody who would allow their moans to be taped and distributed to the world. I wanted the world to hear my moans, I thought. And then realized that I would have to also learn how to play an instrument brilliantly. Wake up to the fact, I said out loud. I don't know why. I wondered if it was possible to donate my body to science before I was actually dead. I

wondered if a disease were to be named after me what the symptoms would be.

Page 75 (Characterization passage)

The abandonment by her mother and sister has left Nomi somewhat oblivious to the fact that people do care for her and want to stay beside her, like her father. ✓ This causes her to try too hard with her boyfriend Travis as well and obsess over every detail of him. Also, Nomi liked the moaning of Keith Jarrett, a jazz player with a similar crisis, because she wishes she could voice her frustration to the world. Unfortunately, she must "wake up to the fact" that people won't hear her and she may not get the chance to interact with the outside world.

By this time, Nomi begins to lose hope of an adventurous life and has accepted that death might be easier. By donating her body to science, she wonders what disease they would find in her as a result of desperation.

Context:

Before Nomi's reflection in this passage, she had been drawing on the driveway with chalk and squishing the melted tar between her fingers. Following this, she walks to a hill and watches the city lights come on in the night. She refers to the city as a "magical kingdom" (74), the place she would most like to go. There are some very deep, mature thoughts that Nomi expresses in this passage when she returns home. The atmosphere changes significantly between these two scenes. While Nomi plays with the tar in her driveway, it seems slightly child-like and mindless. To contrast this, she examines her situation at home, reflecting upon the fact that no one can hear her problems or desires. Her transition in thought is effective as she switches from just a young girl to a young adult in a matter of minutes. Also, as she moves from outside into the security of her home, she is able to release her thoughts to the only person that understands them; herself, to the background of her sister's music. This change in setting shows how she has to keep her feelings bottled up inside when *outside* in her town. After this passage, Nomi and Travis visit a man referred to as The Golden Comb to purchase marijuana. This again transforms Nomi in front of our eyes into a much older, reckless individual. It is clear that the smoking and rebelling helps her cope with her extremely sheltered and difficult lifestyle. She expresses that having her own brand of cigarette satisfies her need "to own something, like a brand" (85). These small things give her something in this town to enjoy and keep as long as she wants. Her problems from the passage are made easier by the small, exciting act of behaving unacceptably. In conclusion, this passage dramatizes Nomi's personality. As soon as she seems like just a normal girl playing outside, she strikes us with a moment of purely sad and disturbing thoughts that are unlike those that should be in the minds of people her age.

Significance:

This passage is responsible for the development of Nomi's hilarious and saddening persona. Her behaviour and thoughts are humorous but at the same time, can be heartbreaking. She is the kind of character that achieves sympathy but laughter as well.

Nomi doesn't seem to feel like people care a lot about her. This is brought on when her mother and sister abandon her. She wonders if they will ever have a family again. She especially feels the loss of her sister, the one person who had similar feelings about the city as her. She still aches at the fact that her sister left her alone. When Travis explains that someone may be behind Nomi some day and need to know where she is going, he pinpoints the situation of her possibly leaving and that she too will be missed. This dramatic irony proves that people like Travis and Nomi's father care for her and wouldn't want her to leave. They want to know where she is going, if she has any plans of leaving like the rest of her family. Nomi still feels alone. She is also very nervous around Travis and obsesses over every detail of him like his "favourite combinations" because she thinks he "appreciates creative answers" (70). It is hard for her to accept that he loves her for who she is because no one in this town understands her.

Tash's music allows Nomi to relate with her sister and the outside world. Keith Jarrett is a musician who played mostly jazz and classical music. He is an inspiration to Nomi because he forced his opinions and frustrations out into society. Nomi wishes she could voice these "moans" as well so that maybe she would be heard. He went through a crisis similar to Nomi in which he felt isolated from the rest of the music world because he did not fit in with the other classical composers. He had so much to say but the structure of classical rhythms did not allow him to express it. Jarrett attempted to break into a jazz style to incorporate his own style but received

bad reviews that instigated a nervous breakdown for him. Finally, he plucked up the courage to try again and succeeded greatly in his own music. ✓ In the same way, Nomi is separated from the world and unable to express herself due to the structure of the town. Jarrett's story may foreshadow Nomi's future in the book. I believe she will be rejected by the outside world or perhaps shunned for her actions just as Keith had his nervous breakdown. This experience will cause her to learn to fit in to her town happily. In other words, Nomi will eventually find peace with her surroundings but only after suffering a bit longer.

Interesting
Similarities
between
the
two.

Nomi's hope has almost completely disappeared since the beginning of her story. She used to long for a life in the city where she could find herself and learn from her mistakes and adventures. However, now she has accepted the town's general mindset that death is easier and offers a lot less pain. In death, she could do what she wants, free of the limitations of her strict hometown. She is also curious as to what type of illness they would find if she donated her body to science. Surely the desperation would make her crazy. She wishes she could donate it right now since she has suddenly favoured death. ✓ This passage is significant in marking a shift in her thinking and goals, from achieving freedom to death.

The name Nomi, short for Naomi, has many different meanings, all positive. In general, the name can mean 'pleasant' or 'sweetness' in Hebrew.² This is ironic since Nomi is rarely sweet or amicable towards people. For instance, when she visits her friend Lydia in the hospital she loses her temper with the nurse and raises her voice. She is often short tempered and not overly sociable with anyone in her town. In Japanese, the name is also equivalent to 'beautiful correction.'³ I predict that Nomi will set out on the road to 'correct' herself and learn to love her town. Lastly, Naomi was the mother in law of Ruth in the Bible.⁴ In this chapter of the Bible, Naomi was left with her two loving daughter in laws after both her sons and husband died. Her

daughter in laws were loyal to her and when deciding to travel back to the land of Judah to find a better life, they persuaded to come along even though she felt there was nothing left for her anymore. However, Naomi continues to despair, begging to be called Mara meaning bitterness because God has made her life bitter.⁵ While I believe Nomi will have the opportunity to create a new life for her in her town, she may follow her namesake and remain bitter and lonely. In this case, the meaning of her name would show irony since she is not sweet and may never learn to improve her self.

And...

"Nomi" → "No me"

↙
No place for her in
her town.

Connections:

I found Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness* very similar to our class novel *Lord of the Flies*. The characters go through similar experiences, suffer growing pains and the symbol of slaughtered animals has some similar meaning as well. Firstly, Nomi is subject to the same sense of isolation as the boys when they are stranded on the island. The boys are isolated from the outside world and managing with out the help of their parents. This is similar to Nomi's situation; being abandoned by her mother and sister, and isolated from the rest of the world or the non-Mennonite society. Moreover, as a result of being mostly on their own, both the boys and Nomi are faced with challenges as they grow. The boys must struggle to keep order on the island while Nomi struggles with freedom and authority. All characters have difficulty deciding who is in charge and what rules are important to obey. They rebel against these rules and are frowned upon. Finally, both novels capture the symbol of slaughtered animals. In *Lord of the Flies*, the hunt is considered to show manliness and power. Nomi also has the fate of working in a slaughterhouse when she gets older. This job shows maturity as well. These animals also symbolize death in somewhat different ways. The boys' kill shows the death of order and civilization, ultimately leading to a fight to the death for some characters. In Nomi's case, slaughtering animals is the death of freedom and choice, and may as well be the end of her life. All in all, the two books ^{have} had similar characters, conflicts and themes.

Nomi's story is comparable to situations I have seen in the world around me. Typically, we see Mennonite people as stuck in the past and sometimes look down upon them for their lifestyle. They are depicted as the 'good, hardworking people,' which Nomi does not exhibit in this novel. I mostly relate this book to families with a family business. Often their children are expected to undertake the business when the parents retire. The children usually grow up

working for their family business and not other companies. Society usually sees these children to be lucky to have something handed down to them, but for many it is a burden. It inhibits them from having other work experience and travelling out of their comfort zone. This is just like the way Nomi's expected behaviour is passed along through her townspeople's' ancestry. It is not acceptable to act differently and this is a burden for her. She is isolated in her own small Mennonite town and doesn't have the opportunity to try new things and discover herself.

Be specific

I found I personally connected to the text because Nomi, despite her differences in background, is very like any other teenager. I could easily relate to her feelings of wanting freedom as do many individuals our age. The teenage years are a time where you can begin to discover yourself and what you are interested in and like or dislike. Sometimes I have the urge to travel the world and experience beyond my hometown. Fortunately, I have had greater opportunities to do so than Nomi has but the desire for more is still there. The question of Fate and the future is evidently the same with me as well. I am unsure of my future but am looking forward to University where I can hopefully get a better idea of who I want to be. For Nomi, this chance lies in moving to the city; a more complicated decision but both of us have to leave family to do so. The novel is written in a mature yet uncomplicated style that is easy to understand and similar to how I think. For all these reasons I feel I can connect to Nomi and the idea that new experiences are required for growth and that sometimes these come with a price however small or large.

Works Cited:

1. "KEITH JARRETT: A Sketch of His Life and Work." *Neologistics* — Lynn David Newton. Lynn David Newton, 2009. Web. 19 Apr 2012.
<<http://www.lynn david newton.com/music/kj/JarrettSketch.html>>
2. "Naomi - Meaning of the name." *BabyNamesPedia*. BabyNamesPedia, 2012. Web. 19 Apr 2012. <<http://www.babynamespedia.com/meaning/Naomi>>.
3. "Ruth, Chapter 1." *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2012. Web. 19 Apr 2012. <<http://www.usccb.org/bible/ruth/1/>>.

Note: All passages in this Independent Study Unit are from Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness*, published in Toronto in the year 2004.

Endnotes:

1. (KEITH JARRETT: A Sketch of His Life and Work.)
2. (Naomi - Meaning of the name.)
3. (Naomi - Meaning of the name.)
4. (Naomi - Meaning of the name.)
5. (Ruth, Chapter 1.)

Commentary Checkbric ~ Log 1

Knowledge and Understanding

Mark:

- ☒ Very good/excellent annotation of passages (identifies all 'noteworthy' aspects of passage)
- ☒ Very good/excellent details about context
- ☒ Explains *significance* of context
- ☒ Research (references/vocabulary) properly cited

20 /20

Thinking and Inquiry

Mark:

- ☒ Very good/superior analysis of details and significance of passages organized around 'big ideas'
- ☒ Explains significance of passages with very good/excellent support from text
- ☒ Includes onomastic analysis
- ☒ Very good/excellent discussion of themes/ideas in passages using support from text
- ☒ 3 page minimum length

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• Communication

Mark:

- ☒ Style (clear, effective communication)
- ☒ Good paragraph form
- ☒ Good quotation form
- ☒ Inclusion of all relevant aspects of assignment
- ☒ Effective structure and organization
- ☒ Uses language conventions with considerable/high degree of accuracy

20 /20

Application

Mark:

- ☐ Draws sound/excellent connections made (Text to world, self, text)

8 /10

Feedback

Excellent. Insightful and well written.
I'm going to read this novel over the summer!

68/70