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From Stalag 14 to Studio 54: A Literary Analysis of Music in Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness*

Music is an influential language that enriches our everyday lives. Although the universality of music is unequivocally enthralling, the essence of music lies in its ability to create a further dimension of expression by giving listeners the opportunity to escape from their day-to-day lives. In Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness*, this very aspect of music intrigues Nomi Nickel. As a teenager growing up in a small Mennonite community, Nomi often feels trapped by her religion. In an attempt to concretely substantiate the reality of the recent disappearance of her family members and escape societal pressures from her church, Nomi turns to music. Although Nomi's initial experiences with music are somewhat detrimental, she begins to gradually let music into her life. In doing so, Nomi begins to form a tangible relationship with music through powerful, prominent lyrics and memorable melodies -- a relationship that, for the first time in her life, she completely understands. These lyrics and melodies give Nomi a sense of permanence through her recurrent listening of certain songs, such as Zeppelin's "All My Love" that she would listen to "over and over again" (Toews 36), and allow her to relate to these songs in her own life. As Nomi strengthens her connection with music, she begins to escape from her daily life and, as a result, begins to reflect on her life in her search for stability. Through these nostalgic moments in her

narration, Nomi's understanding of the world around her begins to materialize, her sense of reality strengthens, and she is able to uncover the truth about the past, such as her own family's involvement in music. This newfound mutual connection to music not only establishes concreteness in Nomi's life, but also gives Nomi and her family hope for a future where they can be permanently together once again.

Although Nomi was introduced to music at a young age, her initial experiences with music were not very positive. In one incident, she was forced by her Uncle Hands to go to the Rest Haven -- a retirement home for the elderly -- and sing Christian hymns for "The Oldest Mennonites in the World" (135). This experience left Nomi pessimistic for the future, wanting to avoid singing at the Rest Haven again. As a result, Nomi begins to challenge the boundaries of traditional Christian music by exploring alternative music genres like Rock & Roll, which was considered a sin by the church. Her Uncle Hands adamantly disapproved of her choice in music saying, "in his dictionary *hell* comes after *rock 'n' roll*" (17). Although Uncle Hands thinks his preaching was helpful and encouraging, it had quite the opposite effect. At this point in her life, Nomi is confused about the role she plays in her community's social fabric and she doesn't know what to believe or believe in. As a result, her sense of reality is clouded and a void of understanding develops as she is left exiled in her community, much like the album "*Exile on Main Street* (an album named for the Mennonite people if there ever was one)" (182). Her confusion and pressure from her Uncle Hands' preaching leads Nomi on a path of sex, drugs, and Rock & Roll. Although the initial outcome is somewhat detrimental to Nomi's life through her shunning in the community, this introduction to music proves

beneficial in the long run as Nomi's pathway to stability and understanding begins to take shape.

As Nomi begins to take interest in various styles and genres of music, her knowledge and awareness of the world around her is enhanced. The development of this environmental cognizance brings to light the music that already exists in her everyday life. For example, in her narration, Nomi mentions the television show *Hymn Sing* many times; it was Ray's favourite show "where a group of men and women in black suits and long dresses stand in even lines on risers singing hymns for half an hour" (190). Although this passage is quite monotonous in its visualization, it is also very important. Where is the excitement in a bunch of men and women standing in "even lines on risers" (190)? The Nickel Family is constantly under scrutiny from the community and involved in varying degrees of conflict or crisis with a neighbour or colleague. In this hectic environment, the members of the Nickel Family need to take time to escape the instability of day-to-day life. For Ray, this takes the form of *Hymn Sing*; it is one of the only aspects of his life that is concrete and based on routine, while evoking a sense of stability. Upon closer inspection, this inspires Nomi's passion for music through her "[envy] of people who had...something to do at the same time every day" (112). Thus, Nomi begins to incorporate music as a concrete fixture in her everyday life: she listens to Travis playing the same songs by James Taylor and Bob Dylan, further strengthening her bond with her boyfriend; she learns to play the French Horn to create tangible evidence of her growing passion for music; and most importantly, she plays records over and over again whenever she gets the chance. The latter is extremely significant as recorded music is permanently concrete in its existence. When music

is recurrently played, the rhythm will always be the same, the melody will always be the same, and the lyrics will always be the same. Never before has Nomi had this kind of control over permanence in her life; she has the ability to control music with the push of a button -- or in this case, the playing of a record. With her newfound power and control over music, Nomi begins to expand her control by pursuing a concrete understanding of the environment around her. Finally, a sense of reality has emerged in her life. She finds herself relating to the lyrics of the songs (199), getting lost in the melodic measures, and most importantly, reflecting on her past. This nostalgia produced through her relationship with music helps Nomi with an understanding of her past, especially as she learns of her mother's past musical endeavours.

Although Nomi has developed a strong relationship with music, she is not the only person in her family emotionally invested in it; in fact, every member of the Nickel Family can relate to music on a deeper level. Throughout her childhood, Tash used to play the flute "in her room with her blinds down" (265) in the same way that Nomi uses music to escape from the societal pressures in her community. As a common fixture in his career and everyday life, Ray conducts the school orchestra and participates in music festivals (280). Although these examples contribute to Nomi's passion for music, nothing concretizes her sense of reality and hope for the future more than her mother's relationship with music. It is interesting to note however, that it is not until after her mother's disappearance that Nomi learns of Trudie's musical past. In a surprise visit by Edwina McGillivray -- who also happens to be Ray's adjudicator for his student's music festival -- Nomi discovers that her mother was a singer, actress, and musical theatre star (281). Mrs. McGillivray plays

an integral role in the novel as she symbolizes the connection that music can establish in society; thirty years after witnessing Trudie perform in “a musical at Pantages Playhouse”, Mrs. McGillivray is miraculously reconnected to the Nickel Family once again (282). Is this surprise meeting a product of chance? Or has the universal quality of music brought them back together? This event concretely portrays the power that music possesses and suggests that Nomi’s whole family can be permanently reconnected in the future through the role that music plays in each of the family member’s lives. Ultimately, through this experiential learning of music and her moments of self-discovery established by her nostalgic narrative, Nomi is finally able to grasp a concrete understanding of the past, create a sense of reality for the present, and dream of the stability that the future entails.

Through music, Nomi has been able to create a soundtrack for her life. By the end of the novel, her newfound understanding of the past propels her to concretize her reality and delineate her future. As immigrants from Russia and escapees of Stalag 14 -- a prisoner of war camp -- (122), Nomi’s family has endured many hardships throughout their life. How can a couple of excommunications tear this family apart, especially with the music that exists in each one of their lives? Maybe Nomi’s dream of walking the streets of New York is not so unattainable after all. With music as a permanent fixture in her life, there is no limit concerning her future. Who knows? Maybe Nomi will reconnect with her family once again as they watch Trudie perform on stage in New York -- the stage of Studio 54.

Work Cited

Toews, Miriam. *A Complicated Kindness*. Toronto, ON: Seal Books, 2004. Print.