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Duality and the Importance of Canadian Humour in A Complicated Kindness

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Duality and the Importance of Canadian Humour in A Complicated Kindness

MANDY L BARBERREE
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“Every novel says to the reader: “things are not as simple as you think.” That is the novel’s eternal truth...” (Kundera 19).

In A Complicated Kindness, Miriam Toews takes readers into the secluded fictional Mennonite community of East Village, located on the prairies of Manitoba, Canada. For many readers, a Mennonite community is something that is seen from the outside. What remains in view are mere surface features, a presented face to the world. In the case of Toew’s fictional town of East Village, this mask comes in the form of an antiquated, replica, tourist village that lies outside the town proper. The existence of this front turns the real and secluded East Village into “a town that exists in the world based on the idea of it not existing in the world” (48). “People come ... from all over the world for a first-hand look at simple living,” and what they see when they get there is not the real, but the ideal (11). Much of the book is built on layers of affecting metaphors, coupled with irony and humour, which serve to illuminate the dynamics of the real and ideal in this religious fundamentalist community. Toews’ peels back the hidden layers of a symbiotic relationship between this real and ideal so that a reader can empathize instead of judge what may seem to outsiders a hypocritical contradictory existence for the people in this Mennonite town.

The fake town is the ideal version of how the outside world – and how the most powerful, fundamentalist and traditionalist Mennonites of the community – would like to believe the modern day inhabitants of this secluded town live. Even the American tourists who visit make note of this juxtaposition. It’s a situation easily compared to the American tourist in search of the simple ‘nice’ Canada. But the reality – even in the winter wonderland of Canada - is never so simple. Sarah M. Corse speaks of the complication of the ideal and the real of Canadian identity when she writes that

“The very phrase “Canadian Nationalism” is misleading in that it subsumes a problematic series of concepts within a naturalized phrase that gives no indication of the turmoil right beneath the surface” (38). Canada’s dual nature, its real turmoil that exists beneath its popularized ideals can be easily compared metaphorically to Toews’ novel in reveling moments such as when “The Mouth [Nomi’s Uncle] read Revelations by candlelight in the fake church while the people of the real town sat in a field of dirt cheering on collisions” (Toews 206). This is an example of modern contradictions that clearly exist in modern day Canada and in the fictional community of East Village. It also presents growing confusions for Nomi Nickel, the main protagonist in the novel. The contrast of the loud, intense cheering of violent collisions to the outward calm and quiet of a candlelit prayer session is one early illusion, an ironic juxtaposition, to the ‘turmoil right below the surface’ of this particular community.

Many reviewers of Toew’s novel see only as far as the duplicity of the fake village versus the real one. One reviewer described it only as far as “a strict Mennonite community ... economically bankrupt and intellectually oppressive” that was “like waking up in a crazy bible camp...” (Miriam). On the surface, Nomi quips about her community when she remembers her sister Tash. “We’re a national joke, she’d say. Seriously, she’d say, we’re the joke town in the joke province in the joke country” (71); but the use of irony in the text takes this adolescent humorous look at East Village and Canada to deeper levels of duality– duality being that double nature of the real existing together with the ideal.

This sardonic tone persists in Nomi’s early introductions of the town and its relationship to its religion. She tells us that “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” (5). She refers to Mennonites as “the most embarrassing sub-sect of people to belong to if you’re a

teenager” (5). Here, the strict fundamentalism of this community with its patriarchy and excommunication is seemingly reduced to a teenager’s embarrassment about being ‘un-cool’. But it’s cutting comments such as these that take the harsh reality of East Village down a notch and make it something that we can laugh at, and along with Nomi, instead of judge. At the same time, her humour alludes to the ‘suffering’ and emotional deaths that people seem to be quietly advancing towards in their private inner lives. Nomi’s witticisms about her community serve as a survival mechanism for coping with and, at the same time, revealing the duality of her world.

I argue that a closer look at Toews’ use of irony and humour in creating empathy allows the reader to see East Village as a metaphor and an addition to the larger discourse on Canada and nationalism. The novel’s blanketing of dark dualistic humour fits together with East Village’s dichotomy to create a dialog comparable to the continuing, evolving and permanent dialogs which exist concerning Canada’s national identity. This is possible when we see both East Village and Canada as forms of what Benedict Anderson refers to as “imagined communities” of connected sociological groups of people. As a Canadian novel, the double nature of Nomi’s community lends itself easily for viewing as a hyperbolic metaphor – a distilled and concentrated form - for the community of Canada and its realistic identity issues which exist below its surface apparent/popularized ideals.

Humour undoubtedly has a prominent place in Canadian literature. And as a previous winner of the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour for her novel The Summer of My Amazing Luck Toews is no stranger and amateur when it comes to employing it here. Humour fits particularly well into this Canadian landscape and its dualistic identity because, as critic R.E.Watters puts it,

there is a kind of humor that combines full understanding of the contending forces with a wry recognition of one's ineffectiveness in controlling them – a humor in which one sees himself as others see him but without any admission that this outer man is a truer portrait than the inner – A humour based on the incongruity between the real and the ideal, in which the ideal is repeatedly thwarted by the real but never quite annihilated. Such humour is Canadian. (543)

Watters points out that Canadian humour acknowledges the fact that humans – whether as individuals or as imagined communities – recognizes that one can see themselves within the idealistic image that outsiders observe and at the same time accept their often contradictory inner realistic nature, realizing that there is no need or possibility in settling on one of the two halves of the whole. Both parts are real and valid – even though they contradict. Canadian humour acknowledges this and plays with it. Gerald Noonan adds to this that “The basis of Canadian humour rests squarely upon that full understanding of contending forces” (915).

Lister Sinclair has said that the “Canadian method of making our small voice heard is the use of irony, “the jiu-jitsu of literature...” (543). Toews carefully weaves the duality of irony into her imagery, “this particular manner of saying two things at once, of pretending to speak a dominant ‘language’ while subverting it at the same time” (Hutcheon vii). And as Hutcheon also goes on to explain, the double nature of ironic meanings and literal meanings together “disrupts any notions of meaning as single, stable, decidable, complete, closed, innocent, or transparent.” This transforms the sad yet humorous metaphoric symbols, which Toews uses, into reflections of the true complexity of the contradictions that eternally co-exist in the real world. The double nature of irony makes it an apt tool for illustrating the complexity of a dualistic community. Noonan writes about the importance that duality, through humour, adds to a text when he writes that “Duality makes possible

a different angle of perception, even of stereotypes” (913). This makes ironic humour especially helpful as a way of creating empathy for a somewhat separated religious community. Noonan also points out that this type of humour, one that presents “...a duality of mind, not one-mindedness” (917) is a much more useful literary tool in a pluralistic world.

While Toews’ use of humour draws the reader in from the outside and enables them to relate to East Village, the dark humour that she employs is, by these standards, very Canadian in the way that it acknowledges the duality of this community; East Village is therefore easily transposed to the wider conversation of the ideal and the real within the imagined community of the nation of Canada. Yet, without humour, this bridge to a broader comparison would be impossible. Without it, Toews would be showing us a much darker and hypocritical vision of this community. Humour makes the dichotomy in East Village a more human struggle, one in which judgmental attitudes towards what may be previously conceived as simple contradictions are set aside for an understanding of the interwoven nature of the popular ideals of a community and its everyday struggles.

There are a number of ways, symbolic coupled with humour, in which Toews establishes the hidden angst of the community of East Village and reveals the community’s dual nature as a main source of tension in the novel. Some of the text’s strongest examples illustrate a unified theme of literature’s ability to reveal to us the turmoil of the real below the surface of the ideal. They add layers of complexity to the text and form the heart of its conflict.

Using game playing as a metaphor, Nomi gives us a quick snapshot of hidden strife when she describes some of the few games that she, her friends, and other Mennonites are permitted to play.

we would play this game called *Knipsbrat* with each other until our middle fingers were sore. It was one of the few games we were allowed to play. Golf was another one because it consisted of using a rod to hit something much, much smaller than yourself and a lot of men in this town enjoyed that sort of thing. (39)

Games are an ideal and traditional way for people to have fun and spend time together. What could seem less threatening than a children's card game or a slow game of golf? But here we see them used as a window - with ironic humour - into the hidden oppression that exists in this community. The children who watch the cars colliding while tourists listen to fake sermons are the ones secretly 'giving the finger' to the rules of their community in the limited outlet of a game of *Knipsbrat*, and they do it until their "middle fingers are sore" from it.

A game of golf is fun here not only because it is one of the few games allowed but because it satisfies in its players the underlying desire to "hit something much, much smaller than yourself." This is a dark comment on patriarchal domestic abuse and alludes to the fragmentation and unhappiness of a community within the context of games - whose ultimate purpose is to achieve the *opposite* effect upon its players than Toews' irony connotes here.

Toews writes that "stories are what matter." This is often because they reveal to us the hidden layers of life through the secrets they tell – again, the turmoil beneath the surface. (Toews 245) And another way in which *A Complicated Kindness* shows us that stories illuminate the world and its hidden turmoil is in a moment where Nomi remembers that "In the morning I watched dust enter my room through a crack in my blind. No, I heard my sister saying, that dust has always been there. It's the sunlight that illuminates it" (127). Here we can see story as the sunlight whose illumination allows us to perceive the ever present but previously hidden realities – the dust - that Nomi is slowly coming to comprehend. We see that the hidden turmoil in this Mennonite

community has always been present. And in the next paragraph, Nomi and her father debate and renounce the purchase of Lemon Pledge. The noticeable dust of hidden unhappiness that has now been illuminated, they no longer feel the need to clean away. “Some pledge,” says Ray, in a pun on the dusting product that swears to keep dust at bay, hidden from sight. This pun plays to the end of his and Nomi’s naivety, to their family life that existed before Nomi’s sister and mother left them both.

Just like the dark ulterior satisfaction obtained from a game of golf, the invisible dust that is laid bare as we are given the pieces of Nomi’s story is revealed in the pun on the word ‘pledge.’ This pun makes light of a broken pledge between man and wife, sisters, and the bond of family. This is because one half of the Nickel family has abandoned the other. The dust that was kept hidden is now illuminated by story and to remain on display. Ray and Nomi give up the act of dusting just as Trudie (Nomi’s mother) and Tash (Nomi’s sister) have given up the pledges that come along with family – the pledges that maintain the ideal of a family and keep the hidden dust and the turmoil of discontent concealed from sight. And the immense sadness of the moment is both explained and illumined with a pun.

Another way in which Toews describes a life of hidden strain, is by using the recurring symbolic metaphor of the silence of death and blood loss. In an early introduction to her world, Nomi ruminates that...

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*. (4)

Here is the pressure of blood running silent and unheard beneath the outer surface of the human who stands as a dualistic identity. This quiet strain is an example of the tumultuous real underneath the surface ideal which we can view beyond the individual, to that of a community. The rushing pressure is ready to explode through the wounds of doubt and conflict within the hearts of the characters. Sorrow is suppressed and waiting to explode here in the form of abandonment, excommunication, and quiet rebellion. The humour here is also in the play on words of people not having choked on their dinner, or suffocated from a lack of oxygen, but by the metaphorical death from the emotional incongruity of their lives; it is this juxtaposition of the physical ways that people die to the emotional ways that can kill a person slowly. This strange dark humour allows a reader to relate to the power of the subterranean silence in East Village. So much of the tension in A Complicated Kindness is hidden like active blood under the pressure of silence; but it bursts to the surface through simple, personal, diary-style flashbacks that Toews presents through the awakening adolescent mind of Nomi.

In another use of the symbol of blood loss, Nomi describes her and her father Ray:

He lifted his hand and put it on mine and we held our two hands there together on the side of his head near his ear, as though we were attempting to prevent blood loss while waiting for an ambulance to arrive. (28)

Even here, Nomi and Ray prevent the letting of silent emotional pain which is a quiet wound that also leads to its own kind of death; but the physical absurdity of the two of them placing their hands on Ray's head, in a stoic pose, lends a sad humour to the scene and dulls the edge of its gravity and melancholy, while at the same time illuminating the sadness for the reader to see. This pose seems odd and comforting, yet it alludes to a hopeless and inevitable ebbing away of the emotional life force of these two ever more lonely and polarized characters. Just as revealed dust and

the additional reasons men enjoy golf do, this silent blood loss shows the hidden force below the surface, under pressure and ready to burst forth from hidden emotional wounds.

Nomi also shows the reader many scenes in the story where characters are quite often doing things under the cover of night. East Village's citizens, in their own personal ways, are subtly dissenting and making compromises with their commonly assumed ideals. Nomi tells us that "...that's the thing in this town – there's no room for in between. You're in or you're out. You're good or you're bad. Actually, very good or very bad. Or very good at being very bad without being detected" (10). These undetected activities are something that nearly all characters partake in and Toews adds to these moments by placing them under the cover of darkness. This adds absurdity and dualistic irony to some of these scenes, which creates humorous revelations regarding the undercurrent of the tension that keeps the characters sleepless. This symbol's dual purpose is much like the dust unconquered by Pledge and the blood which courses silently through veins. Story reveals the silent unseen - the other half of the whole. Trudie shelves books in the library – in the middle of the night. Ray drives across the border to get coffee, sits in a lawn chair watching the highway, goes to the dump to organize and clean it up, or slowly sells off the family furniture – all under the blanket of nightfall. Even Nomi's strict uncle 'the Mouth' is spied in a midnight raid to the fridge for an uncharacteristically indulgent helping of ice cream. And it all happens under the cover of night

Nomi stays out all night most nights, traveling around the outskirts of town with her boyfriend Travis. On one particular evening escapade, they paint a goat barn red and wash the paint off their naked bodies with a nighttime swim. This particular event offers up a picturesque metaphor for the hours of darkness and its hidden sins against their communal religion. Travis and Nomi "floated around in the gassy rainbows for hours talking about stuff and lighting the gas...so it was

like we were in hell. Rainbow pools of fire in the pits, the smell of smoking stubble, the hot wind, dying chickens, the night, my childhood” (200). Toews uncovers these nocturnal activities, these hidden forays away from the public/daytime identities of these characters by bringing them to light through Nomi’s story.

This night swim is an ironic play on biblical imagery – so central to this religious community’s bonds and the very causes of its tensions and paradox. Travis and Nomi’s skinny dipping is described in terms of the fires of hell. The irony here is that the sexual and mental awakenings of Nomi, and her birth into adulthood, are also an encroaching death in regards to her dying relationship to her community as her real feelings and actions collide with the ideals of her Mennonite upbringing. Again, Toews uses oddball scenes to reveal, like sunlight on dust, hidden pleasures in golf, and blood under pressure, that there is turmoil beneath the surface of the daylight image of East Village.

And finally, another prominent way in which Toews employs a symbolic metaphor of duality is when Nomi finds “a note blowing around in a field that had been torn in half right down the middle” (98). Things unsaid - another form of silence like night or silent running blood - are a prominent reoccurring dynamic of this text and a particular contributing dysfunction of this imagined community and its duality. The humour here provides an empathetic context to the symbolic ‘unsaid’ as Nomi reads the only half of the note she can find. The results are nonsensical and amusing. While the half thoughts in the note can be seen as alluding to sexual awakenings and a self consciousness, they also serve to balance out the serious reflection that the incomplete note triggers in regards to confusion that Nomi feels about her life in East Village in general.

It said: I’m sittin in I want to get drunk but I have no flo?? kid here at S.H.
that name’s Andrew. I ugly but the pint are bitching that guys. So one day

you with sexy, of ha ha. Well shit face, me and Sherise ways I guess I'm just my sister for a while if you forgot my pants hope you won't ght you should ditch you could do so much She always a bitch, you don't do what erv, walking around She's gonna trap your thing!! I'm just biz, I'm your gurl here or not. I'll always playboy. Your gurl! (98)

Nomi reflects upon reading the only words that are available on the half of the note she has found that "I knew exactly what your gurl was talking about because I also only ever said half of what I meant and only half of that made sense" (98). By revealing the inner world of Nomi and the town of East Village – beyond the tourist attraction and religious fundamentalism – Toews gives us the missing half of the note. She is showing us the words that aren't said, the ones not written down on paper but the ones that are needed to complete the whole. The missing half of the note is the turmoil of a real world that always exists underneath whatever ideal identity is offered up for others to see. Once an author gives us enough of a character – just as Toews does with Nomi – it is possible to picture the complete note. When the opportunity is given here to imagine entirety – both the outer image and the hidden one – then we are able to comprehend the complexity of the whole – what is visible about a person or community, and what is not. .

All of the characters in A Complicated Kindness grapple with the duality of East Village – a romanticized ideal alongside their modern and complicated reality. Yet both halves of this whole community must exist – the ideal right along with the real. Without both together, there is no whole. Seeing the hidden dust, the real motivations of players, the power of silent invisible blood, anxieties hidden by night, and the existence of unsaid thoughts are all ways of completing the entire, natural, dual picture of a complete person or a community. It is necessary to see the whole. Nomi reflects upon the importance of this when she says,

The things we don't know about a person are the things that make them human, and it made me feel sad to think that, but sad in that reassuring way that some sadness has, a sadness that says welcome home in twelve different languages.

(98)

This sadness permeates the text, and after taking a look at the gravity of these five metaphors one can see how they illuminate the novel's double leveled identity and create the heart of its tension. But also more obvious than ever is the fact that without the layer of black, somewhat self depreciating and ironic humour - a characteristically Canadian sense of humour - the text might be trapped in the disassociating oppression seen where the novel's reviewers leave off.

Just as religious texts join together religious communities, the written word and the simultaneity of people reading common literature is a very unifying and defining force in the founding of, and continual growth of nations as unique and independent forces in the world. We can see any imagined community as "the idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time...conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history" (Anderson 26). East Village is a community imagined into existence. Its controlled, popularized and outwardly common ideals are unchanging...living in "empty time." It even exists as part of a larger world-wide community of Mennonites, imagined together by the followers of Menno Simmons and the commonality of their interpretations of the Bible. In Anderson's words, East Village can also be compared to a community that is "*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). This commonality through their shared values, their particular interpretation of the written word of the Bible (and even their kinship with a worldwide Mennonite community) can be seen in parallel to the 'imagined community' of

Canada which is devised from by a supposed public majority with a set of perceived common goals, ideals... and *readership*. After all, national identity is perpetuated and evolutionary partly in response to the national literature that exists within it. Corse notes that “The naming and development of a national literature is one process by which disparate populations can be symbolically “woven” into one.”

If we identify East Village as a possible parallel example to Canada, we can perceive the five metaphors above as not only illuminating the turmoil of this fictional Mennonite community, but as examples of how novels can work on both a personal and national level to contribute to existing arguments and add to our understanding of issues surrounding identity. And we can perceive A Complicated Kindness as an addition to the fabric that weaves Canada together and helps it continue to build an understanding of its sense of self, and to grow. As Redkop points out, “...if a nation has a vital literary tradition, the national literature is like a conversation in progress, not like a fixed and static monument” (263).

Considering identity and the novel, Milan Kundera writes that “All novels, of every age, are concerned with the enigma of the self” (23). We can see this in not only the coming of age confusion of Nomi Nickels, but in the conflicts of the community of East Village as it attempts a balance act between the modern real world and its religious ideals. And concerning literature and its place in adding to the dialog and formation of a national identity, Anderson writes that “the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life. ...fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations” (35). And Toews text is one which seeps into the reality of wider discussions on identity, therefore affecting our everyday life. Corse states plainly that “National literatures are both the product and partial creator of the nation and our collective sense of national identity. National

literatures are not passive reflections of naturally occurring phenomena, but integral components in the process of national development.” (9)

Near the conclusion of A Complicated Kindness, Nomi asks: “Is it wrong to trust in a beautiful lie if it helps you get through life” (246). The ideals that individuals, communities hold onto exist alongside the everyday realities of an increasingly pluralistic world. But where would imagined communities be if the contradictions between their ideals and realities were simplified, reduced and judged to the dismissible level of mere hypocrisy? Ideals cannot be discarded even though they are never a true representation of what a community is. This is because there exists the inherent human desire to continually strive to improve and progress. The struggle to maintain popular ideals and the communal identities they form are forever examined and held up in order to both maintain the very existing form of an imagined community and to perpetuate its forward momentum. Corse writes that “...nations themselves are both products of human invention and tools in support of further invention” (Corse 8). Even when there is disagreement regarding ideals, which only some of a population might consider communal, the dialog and the culture that grows from these disagreements serves the same purpose of commonality through methods of shared discourse such as newspapers, art and national literature.

“Reading is a solitary activity, but an activity that can powerfully unite solitary readers in imagined communities” (Corse 23). Miriam Toews gives us a solitary task in the reading of her novel that offers unity through the simultaneity that a well written novel can achieve. Using ironic humour and its common theme of the duality of identity, and the quest to understand the "enigma of self," adds to the appeal of Toews' text. Without humour, the multilevel identity and complex tension that Toews shows us would remain foreign and hostile. Humour disarms the harshness of East Village

and unites the reader with its citizens through laughter; particularly with Nomi who may in the end choose to remain as one of the town's ghosts.

Humour disassembles judgment through empathy. The importance of the ability to empathize with the hidden turmoil of East Village does not mean that we should be dismissive of the oppressive things that happen in communities – imagined or not. Even when hidden turmoil exists under the surface of a community, its conflicting senses of real vs. the ideal should not be perceived as hypocritical. To judge something as hypocritical is to be able to disregard it. Empathy helps us to accept, and view with open-minded consideration, the symbiotic nature of a community's complexities.

The conflicts that exist within East Village and in the nation of Canada which we can reflect upon when reading A Complicated Kindness are *not* those of the real *vs.* the ideal. They consist of the real *and* the ideal, together as one complex whole. Nomi knows this. Throughout the novel she ridicules East Village, but in the end even she comprehends the complicated nature of her world. We can very well imagine her staying because we have been made to understand her need for this community – regardless of its conflicting realities.

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