

A means of existence



How do experiences, good or bad, shape the identity of an individual and make them stand apart from others? In the award winning novel *A Complicated Kindness*, by Miriam Toews and the classic best seller *Anne of Green Gables*, by L. M Montgomery, the struggle and desire to find personal identity is profound. Through a series of experiences, the main characters in each novel, one a rebellious Mennonite and the other a red headed orphan, are forced to look within themselves and realize one of the most commonly asked question, “ who am I? As both Nomi and Anne grow internally, not only do they find gratification for themselves, but they also allow others to be set free in the same way. From the beginning of the book to the end, Nomi and Anne’s personal changes are drastic and through all their hardships, both characters and their companions become changed for the better.

Experiences are the foundation to discovering personal identity, seen through death, expectations, rejuvenation. Death can be seen as a catalyst for the formation of personal identity. This is evident through the death of family, life, and religion.

First, in *A Complicated Kindness* Nomi’s personality is shaped when she deals with the death of her family structure. When her mother and sister disappear, “ Sometimes I think Trudie blamed Ray for Tash leaving town with Ian because if Ray had agreed to leave first, had taken us all off to some other place, Tash wouldn’t have had anything to rebel against and would have stuck around”, (118, Toews). Nomi and her father, Ray, are abandoned by Trudie and Tash, Nomi’s mother and sister, because their religious community is suffocating.

Through this abandonment, Nomi and Ray are left with only each other and learn to work together as a small family. With the loss of her female role models, Nomi is forced to mature and develops a unique, free-thinking attitude on life. Death of family is also seen in *Anne of Green Gables* when Anne's mother and father die, "That's why I had lived in the asylum all those years. There was a terrible accident that took the lives of both my ma and pa. It's all quite sad, you know", (17, Montgomery). After the death of Anne's parents in a tragic fire, Anne is forced to live without a family in an orphanage.

Without the proper guidance of her parents, Anne becomes more independent and begins to look for the positive things in life, rather than dwelling on the negative. This allows Anne to grow into an optimistic adolescent. Both novels show clear examples of the death of family structure. Both Nomi and Anne face these losses with high heads, which leads them to gain certain traits that allow them to find their identities. In both novels, Nomi and Anne grow by learn to appreciate the people they love and to be independent.

Next, in *A Complicated Kindness*, Nomi becomes aware of her identity when she faces death of life when her mother, Trudie's, survival is questioned, "The Mouth had suggested once that my mother might have killed herself out of guilt and regret. I think it was the ending he most enjoyed, the typically grim outcome that made sense to him", (245, Toews). Nomi's uncle, who is the leader of her community, suggests that perhaps Trudie killed herself out of guilt for leaving the community. Nomi thinks that this may be a possibility because when Trudie left East Village, she did not take her passport with her.

This upsets Nomi greatly and causes her to reflect on her family life before she was abandoned, which allows her to realize who she is. Death of life can also be seen in *Anne of Green Gables* when Anne's father figure, Matthew dies, " I want to be quite silent and quiet and try to realize it. I can't realize it. Half the time it seems to me that Matthew can't be dead; the other half of it seems as if he must have been dead for a long time and I've had this horrible dull ache ever since", (299, Montgomery).

When Anne is away at school, she hears news of Matthew having a heart attack and dying. Anne comes home and is surrounded by the mourning of Matthew's death, but still is unable to believe that he is gone. Through Matthew's death, Anne realizes her full potential and the meaning of her life. Death of life is a shared experience in both *A Complicated Kindness* and *Anne of Green Gables*. Although death of life affects many of the characters in the novels, it mainly affects Nomi and Anne, who take their mourning and use it to grow.

Because of this death, both characters make life changing decisions; Nomi decides to leave her community in East Village and Anne decides to refuse her scholarship at Queens University and stay home with Marilla, her mother figure. Finally, death of religion defines Nomi as a person when she is unable to follow her religion, " 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. But I'll have no part of that", (5, Toews). As a Mennonite, Nomi is expected to follow her religion.

One important part of religion to Mennonites is the thought of afterlife, which as Nomi states, is all people seem to be living for. However, instead of following the pessimistic outlooks that people have on life, Nomi decides to rebel against her religion and live her life how she pleases. In *Anne of Green Gables*, the death of religion can be seen progressing Anne's identity through her decision to turn her back on the Catholic faith, " Anne hoped that tears would come in solitude...she found it hard to understand, the way God could rip such a loving soul from the world. That night Anne did not pray", (315, Montgomery).

Anne, who becomes quite involved in her religion throughout the book, turns her back on everything she has believed in after Matthew dies. Anne does not understand how God could take Matthew and feels as though her religion has defeated her. In *A Complicated Kindness* and *Anne of Green Gables*, the main characters give up on their religion due to an inner realization that they have. Nomi's realization is due to her desire to live rather than her yearning for death and Anne's realization occurs from the death of Matthew, when she personally feels she has been deceived by God.

Therefore, death can be seen as a catalyst for the formation of personal identity. In *A Complicated Kindness* and *Anne of Green Gables*, there are specific examples that condone the theme of death through family, life, and religion. As the main characters, Nomi and Anne experience different, yet similar, situations that cause them to acquire personal growth, even in the most tragic situations. Through the loss of family structure, the lives of loved ones, and the dismissal of religion, Nomi and Anne prove to be in control of their lives and aware of their identity.

The most negative events can sometimes give us a breath of new life and of new hope. Expectations are what define us in the world and make us who we are. This is proven through religious and social expectations, as well as personal expectations. First, in *A Complicated Kindness*, Nomi is defined by her religious expectations, “ Imagine the least well-adjusted kid in your school starting a breakaway clique of people whose manifesto includes a ban on the media, dancing, smoking, temperate climates, movies, drinking, rock n’ roll, having sex for fun, swimming, make-up jewellery...that was Menno all over”, (5, Toews).

Through Nomi’s strict religion she is expected to behave in a certain manner. Nomi is unable to participate in many activities that most kids her age experience and because of these religious rules and expectations, Nomi rebels against her religion and takes her own path of life, which gives her unique experiences. Another example of religious expectations is from Anne in *Anne of Green Gables*. Anne has difficulty fitting into her new home and community, “ We’re not talking about poetry, Anne – we are talking about saying your prayers.

Don’t you know it’s a terrible wicked thing to not say your prayers every night? I’m afraid you are a very bad little girl”, (50, Montgomery). Because Anne comes from an orphanage, she does not fit in socially or religiously with her adoptive family. Her religious expectations in her new home are quite different from those at the orphanage and Anne finds herself getting punished for her lack of knowledge in the Catholic religion. Similarly in both novels, Nomi and Anne both face religious expectations.

Both girls have trouble fitting into the mould they are given by their religions, and it takes many stands until they both realize what religion truly means to them. When they do, though, they experience a wholesome accomplishment and become very true to their beliefs, which shapes their identity. Next, Nomi grows into her own person through social expectations, “ But that’s the thing about 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”, (10, Toews).

With such an authoritarian community, Nomi has expectations from her peers. Nomi, who so obviously doesn’t fit the mould, is left out of social groups because she is different. Nomi is misunderstood by many people in her community, but she dismisses their disapproval and continues in her journey to find out what makes her happy. Much like Nomi, Anne’s personality is transformed through social expectations. As a girl, Anne finds it strenuous to cope with her role as a young women, “ It’s perfectly awful stuff, Marilla. I’m sure I’ll never be able to sew like you or Diana.

Why must I be kept inside learning something so tedious, while the boys are outside playing? “, (106, Montgomery). Anne strives to be a proper member of society, but she is still true to her personality. Anne would rather be playing with the boys, but instead is expected to learn how to sew like all the other young girls. Many members of the community think Anne is too different for her own good, but in the end of the novel her differences are what make her desirable. As proven, Nomi and Anne’s identities are both defined by social expectations.

Both girls are seen as misfits in their communities, but their differences are just a product of doing the things that are true to who they are. Both girls stand up for the things they love and at first are looked down upon for their actions, but in the end are noticed for exactly who they are. Finally, both Nomi and Anne's identities are influenced by their own personal expectations. Nomi proves that she gains personal growth in the end of the novel, as she had only negative expectations for herself in the beginning, "I'm already anticipating failure. That much I've learned to do.

But then what the hell will it matter to me while I'm snapping tiny necks and chucking feathery corpses onto a conveyer belt in a dimly lit cinder-block slaughterhouse on the edge of town not of this world", (1, Toews). Nomi is very pessimistic about her future, or lack of in her opinion, at the beginning of the novel because she personally expects herself to conform to what the rest of her society does. By the end of the novel, however, Nomi is confident that she is leaving her town to find a better life for herself, where she can find a career that will make her happy and complete her as a person.

Likewise, Anne's identity is strengthened when she is hopeful of what is to come for her in the future, "All the years beyond were hers with it's possibilities lurking rosily in the oncoming years – each year a roe of promise to be woven into an immortal chaplet", (289, Montgomery). By the end of the novel, the girl who was once excluded by her society, confidently sets goals and aspirations for herself. Anne transforms and is content with the person she becomes. Therefore, Nomi and Anne both get closer to finding their identities through their social expectations.

They both show tremendous growth from the beginning of the novel. In conclusion, expectations are what define us in the world and make us who we are. In *A Complicated Kindness* and *Anne of Green Gables*, it is obvious that Nomi and Anne experience a newfound identity through expectations from their religion, their societies, and their own personal expectations. Through expectations, come goals and both characters set and achieve their goals from inner and outer subjects. Expectations can be difficult, but give strength to our personalities and develop our individual identities.