

**Miriam Toews' *All My Puny Sorrows*: A Study of the Catastrophic Losses of
Sisters in the Tradition of Sister-texts**

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Abstract

Miriam Toews' novel *All My Puny Sorrows* is a poignant exploration of the complexities of family relationships, grief, and the search for identity. The story revolves around the lives of two sisters, Elfrieda and Yolandi, who grow up in a tight-knit Mennonite community in Canada. As the narrative unfolds, the sisters' bond is tested by the harsh realities of life, including mental illness, trauma, and loss. The novel delves into the theme of losing a sister and a home, as Yolandi grapples with the aftermath of Elfrieda's attempted suicide and subsequent hospitalization. The physical and emotional distance between the sisters serves as a metaphor for the disintegration of their childhood home and the community that once nurtured them. Toews masterfully captures the anguish and disorientation that accompany the loss of a loved one and the fragmentation of one's sense of belonging. Ultimately, *All My Puny Sorrows* is a powerful exploration of the human condition, one that underscores the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

Keywords: Sisterhood, loss and grief, connections, relationship, community.

The relationship between sisters forms the core of Miriam Toews's writing. According to her, the "theme of sisters" includes "something that is very close to her," "of missing sisters," "of needing sisters," "the special love that sisters share or the antagonism sisters share," and more. Toews's first-person narrators, Naomi Nickel (Nomi), Hattie Troutman, and Yolandi Von Riesen (Yoli), deal with the death of their elder sisters, Natasha (Tash), Min, and Elfrieda (Elf), in "*All My Puny Sorrows*." Losses

of real and imagined homes in the past, the present, and the future are tightly linked to these more catastrophic losses of sisters. The younger sister romanticises the older sister's escape from the persecution of the birth community, which is expressly identified as the Mennonite settlement of East Village, Manitoba, in *A Complicated Kindness* and *All My Puny Sorrows*. In the eyes of the younger sister, the older sister takes compassion and love into a new and less rigid home-space,

shedding the burden but carrying the light.

Toews not only references these writers in *All My Puny Sorrows*, but also casts them as supporting characters in Yoli and Elf’s romance. In a letter to Elf, for example, Yoli closes by quoting from a letter sent from Jane Austen to Cassandra; she compares Emily Dickinson’s “hour of lead” (62) to Elf’s depression; she recalls letters from Elf referring to Virginia Woolf and the “intricacy of despair” (26); and she labels the life insurance left to her by Elf as “a la Virginia Woolf” in its provision of a “room of my own” (271).

Toews, through Elf and the title of the novel, directs Yoli and the readers to another nineteenth-century writer, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and specifically to his 1794 poem, “To a Friend, together with an Unfinished Poem,” which introduces the brother- sister relationship:

In fancy (well I know)
From business wand’ring far and local cares,
Thou creepiest round a dear-lov’d Sister’s bed
With noiseless step, and watchest the faint look,
Soothing each pang with fond solicitude,
And tenderest tones medicinal of
love. I too a SISTER had, an only
Sister--
She lov'd me dearly, and I doted on her!
To her I pour'd forth all my puny sorrows... (6-14)

Coleridge and Toews, who are both interested in the origins of suffering, healing, and sorrow, challenge notions about a one-way interaction between the suffering patient and the caring nurse who provides care. Elf alludes to Edvard Munch’s *The Sick Child* (160). Yoli and Elf, Toews’ twenty-first-century Canadian fictional sisters in *All My Puny Sorrows*, coexist with these carefully chosen references to literary and artistic nineteenth-century figures, both male and female, and their sisters.

In Canadian literature, the most well-known nineteenth-century sisters are Catharine Parr Traill, who is joyful and practical, and Susanna Moodie, who is critical and complains. Literary responses to Traill and Moodie, based on their own literary exchanges and talks, portray the two as competitive and complimentary, repositories for and extensions of one another, opposites and doubles. Toews does not

mention Traill and Moodie in *All My Puny Sorrows*, but the familiar tradition of sisters competing with and completing each other, being “almost the same person” (137) and “enemies who loved each other,” (38) is common in sister-texts, including Toews’ trilogy.

Christina Downing argues in “Psyche’s Sisters: Real-Imagining the Meaning of Sisterhood” that likeness and difference, intimacy and otherness “cannot be overcome,”

(11) but form that paradox, that tension, which lies at the very heart of the sister relationship.

All My Puny Sorrows, a middle-aged story about sisters in their forties, explores the difficulty of saving and refusing salvation. It delves into grief in the face of loss and laments the loss of beauty, as reflected by the older sister and the comfortable home, neither of which can be sustained--not even by the intense sisterhood so powerfully conveyed by Miriam Toews. This link was written in response to her personal grief over her sister Marjorie’s suicide in 2010, who she describes as her closest reader and critic. It is not just about the “other” sister’s influence on the writing sister or the literary output. Toews’ most recent novel revolves with sisters and sisterhood. Yoli’s feeling that, “My sister was so thin I imagined that I could see the outline of her heart” (160). It is a sensation shared by the reader, who sees not only Elf’s heart, but also the heart of the author, moving the reader into a position of witness or even “sisterhood.”

Toews’ writing in the early twenty-first century delves deeply into the core theme of the self in relation to the other, as manifested in sister-love and sister-loss. Tash’s departure from the original household, which includes separating from her younger sister, and Min’s desperate cry to bring Hattie home represent the struggle between the need for sisters to be both separate and together. The complexities of this conflict help readers prepare for the heartbreaking losses in *All My Puny Sorrows*, as the tension between separation and unity becomes excruciating. Yoli, haunted by Elf’s suicide attempts, gradual fading away, violent death, and eventual absence, must confront profound concerns about separation and connection on personal, communal, and grand proportions.

Fragments in *All My Puny Sorrows* include Yoli’s early comment that her grandparents came from “a tiny Mennonite village in Siberia” (18) where “terrible things happened to them there in the land of blood” (18) and her friend Julie’s

shrugging and disturbingly casual explanation that it was only her grandmother who was massacred in Russia: “She couldn’t run because she was nine months pregnant. My grandfather made it with the other kids” (103). The parents’ generation is silent- in Yoli’s words “any hint of the place, the slightest mention of anything Russian, and my parents would start clawing the air” (18) while Yoli wonders about her mother’s comment that suffering “is something that is passed from one generation to the next to

the next, like flexibility or grace or dyslexia” (18). Although *All My Puny Sorrows* accepts the “contagion theory” of trauma and questions the impact of the past on the present, it does not rely solely on rewriting through looking back in order to move forward, but rather moves inward when the home in so many forms, including that of the sister, is torn away. (47)

In *All My Puny Sorrows* the anguish of sister-love and sister-loss - home-love and home-loss contributes to the rewriting and reshaping of what is perceived as the familiar Canadian Mennonite family and story, breaking open the vertical family tree, linear timeline, excluded margin, and retraced diaspora. Through the intimacy of reparative nostalgia and the engagement of the heart, these restrictive lines expand and break open, forging new horizontal connections that provide consolation through the activation of the imagination and the inclusion of dream and vision.

In the case of *All My Puny Sorrows*, the “presence of absence” is expressed by the narrator and author and is located in the loss of the sister, both fictional and real. The cultural mourning is twofold: first, for the idealised childhood home and the past shared with the older sister; and second, for the promise and security of the new home, also idealised, as established for the next generation through the example of that older sister. The object of mourning is concrete and personal, resting in the actual sister rather than in the vaguer and more elusive ethnic and cultural collective of the homeland and the past.

Like the emigre writers of the 1920s and 1930s, Yoli focuses on her own youth and hometown, imbuing it with Edenic aspects. She tells Elf that the mourning doves in Toronto “make me sad and happy and nostalgic I guess for my childhood, our childhood, and the prairies and that feeling of waking up with nothing to do but play,”

(119), and she remembers childhood as “the magical kingdom that was my world”

(188).

Such nostalgia corresponds to what Rubenstein characterises as the “deeper register,” which involves ‘grief for something of great worth that appears hopelessly lost - even if it never truly was, or never could have existed, in the manner in which it is ‘remembered.’ Rubenstein’s version acknowledges “compensatory and even liberating dimensions within the frame of the narrative.” (5,6). In Yoli’s case, nostalgia for the idealised home emerges from the literal disappearance of home, the intensity of which results in “the presence of absence.”

In *All my Puny Sorrows* the ensuing camping trip “in the Badlands of South Dakota” (3) undertaken by the family to kill time between houses is, according to Elf, like being in a ‘mental hospital” (3) or a “refugee camp” (3) or a “halfway house for recovering neurotics” (3). Eventually Elf, through the gift of her exquisite musical talent, establishes a beautiful home in Winnipeg with her partner, Nic - a home described by Yoli as one filled with music, literature, culture, ideas, and light. From the centre of that home, Elf’s life as a musician extends into Europe and around the globe. Yoli paints an impossibly perfect picture which makes beautiful sense to home as the idealised version. Like, the glass piano within Elf’s body that is always on the brink of shattering, the exquisite perfection of Elf and her home, although not literal or believable, is true.

It is helpful to keep in mind this concept of “playing with size” when approaching *All My Puny Sorrows*, a novel in which the ideal sister and home are obviously larger than life and partake of that inflated quality of the “beloved” that keeps them forever beyond reach.

Elf’s loss, as experienced by Yoli, represents the loss of a version or vision of a perfect and protective home that never existed or could exist. Yoli finally discovers, via the prism of nostalgia and the presence of absence, that home does not stand still and is never entirely secure - it is always in motion and change.

Yoli mourns the loss of Elf, as well as the shared memories and narratives of her childhood home, family, and neighbourhood. Downing (167) stresses the intimate ties between “sisterhood and storytelling,” while Jennifer Silverstone adds that “siblings can hold the family narrative for each other and become the containers for each other of the history of their childhood” (235).

Yoli portrays Elf and her home as ideals of beauty, whilst her companion Julie and her home are depicted as chaotic. Yoli’s lifestyle is similar to Julie’s,

although she draws from both the extremes. Similarly, she identifies closely with her cousin, Leni, but sees Leni's melancholy and suicide as connected with Elf. In the framework of the insular Mennonite migration and settlement process, she humorously portrays Julie as a friend and second cousin, and Elf as a cousin and sister (51). When she first discovers Elf's relationships with "fictional sisters" in literature, she is jealous but quickly feels relief in the realisation that her own "grief could be diluted a bit, spread out amongst all of us women, us sisters, even though only one of us was real" (268). Thus, the community of sisters expands into a larger, more open, and fluid formation while the concept of home simultaneously becomes less rigid.

In her sadness and fear prior to Elf's suicide, Yoli humorously but desperately fantasizes about reuniting past families and homes, claiming she wants "to live in a tiny, isolated community in a remote part of the world where all we have to look at is each other and we are only ever a few metres apart." "It would be like an old Mennonite community in Siberia, but happier" (113). The construction of a home and a community

based on the representation of what was left behind in Russia is an intentionally exaggerated example of retelling the break event. Yoli and Toews' rewrite respects a sense of homelessness and the importance of the break event while experimenting with new shapes, tones, and directions.

If music saved Elf "for as long as she was alive," words would save Yoli, who writes to order her grief, reminding Elf in a letter written after her death that the Von Riesens were previously accused of being "only word people" - "a word family" (6). "The presence of absence" in the shape of sister and home forces Yoli to use and remember what Elf has left to her in the form of words. The most significant words for Yoli during the early period of mourning are those of the opening paragraph of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to which Elf has directed her:

Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically.

The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen. (317 - 318)

Elf extends Yoli outward to non-Mennonite stories with lowering skies akin

to her own, using allusions ranging from Coleridge to Woolf to D. H. Lawrence. Through Elf's encouragement, Yoli is "building up new little habitats" in Toronto "among the ruins" of her past, knowing that her story is one of the many global narratives of loss and regeneration. Having lived fully in relationship with the other in the shape of the sister, Yoli uses this experience more broadly, resulting in a flexibility that accepts fewer fixed forms of family, community, and narrative - which opens things up because it needs to journey inside to the heart.

These softer and more cautious chiaroscuro letters balance off the boldness of images and letters on surfaces throughout the novel, such as Yoli's tattoo on her skin, the pictographs on the cliff at Lake Superior, and the red spray-painted AMPS around East Village. Yoli recalls the quotation on Elf's wall: "Something about the horizon of being" (34).

All My Puny Sorrows ends softly, with a dream, vision, or alternative ending to the "real" story, affirming the novel's fairy-tale qualities and addressing a question raised during the 1990 conference, which Kroetsch reiterated in the closing panel: "What gets excluded by the employment of a particular master narrative?" (225). Toews is able to reveal rather than conceal by focusing on the intimate and specific, as she talks for herself rather than others. She reveals the identifiable heart and the painful "land of blood" (18) of the sister, herself, and the present rather than the group or the history. The focus shifts from the prevailing master story and reactions to it to the intimacy of the heart.

When considering Mexico as a site for Elf to die, Yoli envisions "a hammock swaying gently like a cradle, a return to infancy, to the void, and then to nothing" (258). Wordsworth's poetry appears near the end of *All My Puny Sorrows*, although not in the form of a "ode." Lottie quotes: "It is a beautiful evening," which "rips at Yoli's heart" with its depiction of Elf worship at the "inner shrine" (282). In Toronto, Yoli is known as "Lottie's daughter," but in her dream, she is able to identify herself as Elf's sister when she answers the photographer's query about whether Yoli and Elf are in Zurich on a holiday with the heart-wrenching non-sequitur. "We told him we were sisters." The evocative image of the Von Reisen sisters walking "arm in arm like old-fashioned girls" recalls earlier literary sisters. (320 - 321) Elf is not simply the sister mourned, but through death and dying is also the comforter and companion.

Toews is not reinventing the break event or the prevailing centre and margin,

but rather creating states of flexible newness in which anything is possible. In terms of “the home ground of the Mennonite community,” Toews, as Ann Hostetler observes of Di Brandt, demonstrates that it “will always be one of the worlds in which the writer developed, one of the worlds she seeks to connect in a larger view of ‘home’ as the transitional and integrative space between multiple worlds” (85).

For Yoli and Toews, the fixer-upper in Toronto represents a state of grace in its comfort as a site of grieving accomplished through reparative nostalgia. The Toronto home confirms the severity of sister - loss and home - loss with its painful yet liberating reminder of the presence of absence. The void takes on substance within the house and heart, as consolation works from the inside out, rather than from the present to the past or from the edge to the centre. Yoli and Toews break through typical and common depictions of narrative, family, home, and community in order to develop softer and more visionary connections and relationships free of the constraints imposed by lines and shapes that emphasise loss through contrasts.

All My Puny Sorrows has a deep and widespread resonance because it reveals rather than conceals and, as a result, publicly mourns sister-loss and home-loss, seeking consolation and presence in the literary imagination, vision, and dream.

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