**Momik's Moral Sensibility in David Grossman's *See Under: Love*—**

**A Levinasian Interpretation**

**Key-words:** Emmanuel Levinas, David Grossman, moral sensibility, responsibility, suffering, useless suffering

**Abstract**

David Grossman’s novel *See Under: Love* (1954)[[1]](#footnote-1) has received special attention from researchers, and has been described as one of the most important works for understanding the experiences of the Holocaust.[[2]](#footnote-2) The work’s innovation lies in illuminating unconventional perspectives on Holocaust experiences and in creating connections among them. The novel includes four parts; at the center of each is a main character that is intratextually connected with the characters in the other parts. This article will focus on analyzing the first part of the novel, “Momik” (which was also published as a separate novella in 2005), and will show how a moral sensibility is shaped in this part of the novel that can then be conceptualized by means of the last part, “The Complete Encyclopedia of Kazik’s Life.”

The main argument is that Momik’s character undergoes a process of moral development, which is based on concepts such as responsibility and sensitivity to suffering, although Momik’s character is not aware of these directly. Some of the concepts reflected in Momik’s conduct then appear in the fourth part—the “Encyclopedia”—and are surprisingly similar to the key concepts of Levinas’s ethical world view. This article’s intervention will be to show how Levinas’s concepts, especially the concept of “useless suffering,” can contribute to understanding Momik’s moral development. The article will present a joint dialogue between the literary work and Levinas’s philosophical concepts: examining these concepts will enable us to understand their characteristics, and the analysis of Momik’s character will illuminate the developmental process of sensitivity to suffering.

**Introduction: The Cry Whose Echo Will Resound Forever**

The future can bring consolation or compensation to a subject who suffers in the present, but the very suffering of the present remains like a cry whose echo will resound forever in the eternity of spaces.[[3]](#footnote-3) Suffering: … The compass or lighthouse, the criterion for every human decision.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The motto above reflects the importance and centrality of sensitivity to the suffering of Holocaust survivors in Levinas’s philosophy and in the novel *See Under: Love*. The ethical task of any person who encounters this suffering is to try to reduce it in the present, although there is no possibility of completely erasing its traces. This perspective, shared by Grossman and Levinas, is the starting point of this essay.

Levinas and Grossman, each in his own way, offered a response to two key questions: How can an ethical stance be developed following the Holocaust, and what is the nature of moral sensibility that enables sensitivity to the suffering of survivors? This essay will examine a process of development of moral sensibility in the character of Momik, one of the main characters of the novel *See Under: Love*. Levinas’s concepts will allow us to examine the process of development, which is based on a unique use of Grossman’s literary language. Grossman used a variety of literary techniques to shape the character of Momik, endowing him with sensitivity to the suffering of another person; fostering his responsibility toward the other; and finally, cultivating his ability to discern between suffering and useless suffering. On the methodological level, this essay will argue that Levinas articulated the foundational concepts that constitute an ethical stance, which can be applied in interpreting the novel *See Under: Love*, and in identifying three stages in the process of forming such a stance.

**At the first stage**, an unexpected encounter with the face of another person occurs, and as a result, a recognition of his alterity develops. **At the second stage**, as a result of the encounter, Momik translates the language of the other to his own language, and thereby his sense of responsibility and sensitivity to the suffering of the other awakens. **At the third stage**, he develops the ability to discern between suffering and useless suffering, which is followed by an act to try to prevent or fix suffering. Levinas described and explained the importance of the concepts that constitute these three steps in the development of moral sensibility, but did not structure them as part of a developmental process.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, in Grossman’s novel these concepts appear throughout the various chapters as speech acts of the different characters. The focus on the boy Momik (in the first chapter) and on Kazik (in the fourth chapter), who lives an entire life in twenty-one hours and twenty-seven seconds, will allow us to attend to the ways in which the acquisition of moral sensibility is a developmental process in the novel.

The essay will begin by presenting Levinas’s ethical world view, with an emphasis on the concepts of moral sensibility, responsibility, suffering, and useless suffering. It will then present Levinas’s complicated attitude regarding literary works. As opposed to scholarly views according to which Levinas criticized aesthetic works both for the motivation for their creation and for the content reflected in them, or alternatively, that Levinas saw literary works as important sources of inspiration, especially in his interpretation of Jewish texts, a third approach will be suggested. This approach would examine literary works individually for the ethical process that is described in them. Works lacking an ethical process are deemed unimportant by Levinas, and the opposite: works that use literary methods to shape a process that expresses moral sensibility are worthy and important in Levinas’s view.

The last part of the essay will be devoted to an analysis of *See Under: Love* in light of Levinas’s concepts. The novel includes four parts, and in this essay I will discuss two of them, the first part, “Momik” (which was also published as a separate novella in 2005), and the last part, “The Complete Encyclopedia of Kazik's Life.” The focus on the youth Momik, and on Kazik, who lives an entire life in twenty-one hours and twenty-seven seconds, will allow us to attend to the ways in which the acquisition of moral sensibility is a developmental process in the novel.

**Levinas's Ethical Turn: Responsibility as the Final Reality**

Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) is considered one of the twentieth century’s most important and influential philosophers. His treatment of the phenomenology of the other and his formulation of the ethical command toward the other have been seen as a radical shift in the modern and postmodern view of ethics.[[6]](#footnote-6) Levinas suggested an ethics of alterity, at the center of which is a recognition of the complete otherness of the other person, sensitivity to his needs, and responsibility towards him.[[7]](#footnote-7) This ethics is considered a central source of inspiration for the “ethical turn” of the twentieth century.[[8]](#footnote-8) The broader influence of Levinas’s world view on the various social sciences and the humanities, including literature, has been called “the third wave in Levinas studies.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Levinas suggested focusing on the concrete other, whose gaze demands an ethical treatment. The most common metaphor Levinas used to emphasize the priority of the other is the metaphor of the face,[[10]](#footnote-10) on which much scholarship has been written.[[11]](#footnote-11) In the encounter with the face of the other an ethical demand is created:

The face signifies in the fact of summoning, of summoning me —in its nudity or its destitution, in everything that is precarious in questioning, in all the hazards of mortality—to the unresolved alternative between Being and Nothingness, a questioning which, ipso facto, summons me. The Infinite in its absolute difference withholds itself from presence in me; the Infinite does not come to meet me in a contemporaneousness like … in the way in which the interlocutors responding to one another may meet. The Infinite is not indifferent to me. … The idea of the Infinite is to be found in my responsibility for the Other.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Levinas presented ethics as the starting point for philosophy and for self-understanding: by means of ethics we can recognize the infinite and the transcendent within ourselves, which is expressed in the presence of a complete otherness within us. The expression of otherness in one’s consciousness leads to the encounter with the face of the other and to the awakening to commitment toward him.

This commitment takes practical shape in a show of responsibility toward the other. In conceiving of “ethics as first philosophy,”[[13]](#footnote-13) Levinas expressed his opposition to Husserl, who represented Western philosophy in the twentieth century. Husserl’s inquiries, Levinas claimed, led to the study of perception and science in another defined direction: deepening the understanding of self-consciousness.[[14]](#footnote-14) In Levinas’s view, such inquiry directs a person to know his consciousness but also to be reduced to it, without the opportunity of understanding how it can be directed toward something outside of it and of wishing to act.[[15]](#footnote-15) Naturally, this type of inquiry lacks an ethical dimension, and it is also disconnected from a person’s real experience.

On the other hand, a direct encounter with the face of the other is necessary to pass from recognition of the phenomenon to being:

The face I welcome makes me pass from phenomenon to being …: in discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of the response-acuteness of the present—**engenders me for responsibility**; **as responsible I am brought to my final reality**. This extreme attention does not actualize what was in potency, for it is not conceivable without the other. … To be attentive is to recognize the mastery of the other, to receive his command, or, more exactly, to receive from him the command to command.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Only when inquiry includes questioning is the ability for recognition developed in which the speaker in first person acknowledges his own being while facing the right of the other to be: “Language is born in responsibility. One has to speak, to say I, to be in the first person, precisely to be me (moi). But, from that point, in affirming this me being, one has to respond to one's right to be.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

In the act of responsibility a language of dialogue is created between two speakers in first person: one who faces and speaks for himself, and the second, who acknowledges the right of the other to be, and at the same time, by his response to him, his own right to be is acknowledged. The noun “responsibility” (*responsabilité*), in English and French, contains two meanings (responsibility and response). Levinas pointed toward a direct connection between the response to the face of the other and to the assumption of responsibility for the fate of the same other.[[18]](#footnote-18) The decision to show responsibility toward the other, Levinas emphasized, does not stem from obedience to an abstract law but from a real encounter with his face, which creates proximity.

In his book *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas formulated the ethical encounter differently, so that its essence is not in the encounter with the “face” but in the act of “saying.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Georges Hansel pointed out that the word “face” appears 259 times in *Totality and Infinity*, and 67 times in *Otherwise than Being*. In contrast, the word “responsibility appears 37 times in *Totality and Infinity*, and 270 times in *Otherwise than Being*.[[20]](#footnote-20) The act of saying does not begin and end with the encounter with the other, but also expresses the assumption of responsibility: “The relationship with a past that is on the hither side of every present and every re-presentable, for not belonging to the order of presence, is included in the extraordinary and everyday event of my responsibility for the faults or the misfortune of others. In my responsibility that answers for the freedom of another.”[[21]](#footnote-21) The expression of responsibility is a daily occurrence, which includes awareness of the significance of events of the past in the present, especially the assumption of responsibility for the failures of the other and the hardship he experienced. Responsibility for the freedom of the other is expressed in language, but its source is in the transcendental level beyond language. In addition, the linguistic medium is the prism through which and by means of which the other appears. At this point, one may ask how moral sensibility toward the other is formed that would ultimately lead to a sense of responsibility toward the other. Further, we may ask how Levinas distinguished between suffering that enables empathy, and suffering that cannot be grasped. Useless suffering, according to Levinas, renders futile any attempt to offer an ethics following the Holocaust.

**Suffering for the Suffering of the Other**

In his essay “No Identity,” published in 1972, Levinas discussed the concept of “openness” and offered an original meaning for the term:

Openness is the denuding of the skin exposed to wounds and outrage. **This openness** is the vulnerability of a skin exposed, in wounds and outrage, beyond all that can show. … In the sensibility is “uncovered,” is exposed a nakedness more naked than that of the skin which, as form and beauty, inspires the plastic arts, … which always—even, equivocally, in voluptuousness—**is suffering for the suffering of the other**.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Openness is a willingness for total passivity, which could also entail wounding and the willingness to be beaten and to let go of any desire or action that would disrupt it. This is the meaning of moral sensibility, according to Levinas.[[23]](#footnote-23) This kind of vulnerability contains the relation to the other, which becomes an obsession, as a person devotes all of his being to the other, in a way that cannot be reduced to the representation of the other or the consciousness of proximity to him. Suffering for the other means “to support him, to be in his place, to be consumed by him.”[[24]](#footnote-24) It is interesting to note that Levinas’s description is characterized by extreme, even deviant, devotion, that may contain an element of detachment from reality, since every person has his own life. An expectation or even a demand for such sensibility and vulnerability creates a risk, and Levinas even called it an “obsession.” It is hard to imagine it in the real world, although such totality can characterize an aesthetic work. Below we will see how Momik’s behavior in the novel *See Under: Love* reflects such a total devotion. Before doing so, it is important to briefly describe Levinas’s ambivalent attitude toward literature, especially that which deals with the Holocaust.

**Unlocking the Symbolism of Writing: Levinas's Literary Interpretation**

The acuity of the apocalyptic experience lived between 1933 and 1945 is dulled in memory. The extraordinary returns to order. There have been too many novels, too much suffering transformed on paper, too many sociological explanations and too many new worries.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Levinas’s criticism of the extensive literature that followed the Holocaust focused on how the transcription of suffering had become an attempt to find explanations for it, and that transferring suffering into words in itself has not contributed to the ontological change Levinas sought to advance: elevating ethics above any other practice, theoretical or practical. “The ethical turn” that Levinas promoted has permeated into literary criticism and influenced it, both as a perspective through which to examine situations in works that center an ethical decision, and as a way to examine the influence of a certain work on forming the moral stance of the reader.[[26]](#footnote-26) The question of Levinas’s own attitude toward literature has been discussed in various scholarship and remains controversial. The approach common to most scholars has been articulated by Jill Robbins, according to which there is an immanent tension in Levinas’s treatment of literary works.[[27]](#footnote-27) “On the one hand, Levinas incorporates diverse references to authors and poets into his writing and shared with interviewers the importance of his literary education in the formulation of his philosophy. On the other hand, in a well-known paper of 1948,”[[28]](#footnote-28)

Levinas listed several reasons for the detachment between an aesthetic work and ethics: the focus of the artist (especially the speaker in a lyric work) on the expression of his inner feelings; the wish of the artist to innovate for the audience and to surprise them; and an intentional distancing from concrete reality.[[29]](#footnote-29) Levinas argued that on the one hand, literature has the potential to describe the singular, unique, and personal other. On the other hand, the very act of literary writing distances the concrete other, and hides him behind the screen of fiction, pretty words, or metaphorical writing. However, Levinas’s influence on the study of literature has reached far beyond the limits of his complicated attitude toward literature.[[30]](#footnote-30)

In his book *Proper Names*, Levinas examined a number of writers whose works clearly exemplify how poetic language can render the voice of the other present.[[31]](#footnote-31) Levinas showed how the poetic language of writers such as Agnon, Blanchot, and Celan allows them to reach beyond the symbolic mechanism of everyday language, in which the link between a word and a thing is arbitrary. He further suggested seeing the double action of poetic symbolism, which on the one hand represents the voice of a single speaker, and at the same time dismantles this voice, and creates another voice, which allows the reader to encounter the other.

Levinas demonstrated how Agnon, Blanchot, and Celan created, each in his own way, a language that contended with the trauma of the Holocaust, by developing a poetic language that represents the Jewish experience that was lost. Levinas argued that this language contains within it another level of meaning, which articulates the responsibility and commitment of survivors to preserve and remember the Jewish experience that was extinguished: Agnon’s language expresses belonging to the past, on the one hand, and makes the past present, on the other.[[32]](#footnote-32)

This artistic language can represent between the lines and create another voice, which expresses Agnon’s *ahavat Israel* (love of Israel). Levinas suggested reading Agnon’s language as poetry, which strays from the boundaries of an anecdotal description of life in the Jewish town in which it was created.[[33]](#footnote-33) This language is not merely what is said in the saying, but expresses the beyond.[[34]](#footnote-34) By means of the mechanism of symbolization, Agnon structured his stories as a “sign”: the “sign” presents questions and not answers, is rich in implications, and shows how “life is in death, death in life.”[[35]](#footnote-35) In his discussion of Agnon’s poetic language, Levinas began to delineate the way symbolism works in writing: Agnon’s language functions as a poem, not realistically. Agnonite symbolism organizes the past and present, connects various points in the history of the Jewish people at which fractures occurred, and thus attributes meaning to the remembrance of the Holocaust as an even more significant event than it was.

Levinas also discussed Maurice Blanchot, a scholar and author of literature, as well as his close friend, who had smuggled Levinas’s wife and daughter and saved them from the Nazis.[[36]](#footnote-36) Although Levinas and Blanchot did not share the same philosophical stance (Blanchot did not agree with Levinas on the precedence of ethics and its transcendental source), Levinas devoted a chapter of four essays to Blanchot in his book *Proper Names*. In one of the essays, “The Poet’s Vision,” Levinas demonstrated how, according to Blanchot, the work of poetic language can be characterized as deviating from reality.[[37]](#footnote-37) Poetic language enables the understanding of the other by means of poetic imagery, and thus promotes the understanding of the other in reality, and functions transcendentally.[[38]](#footnote-38) Thus, inspired by Blanchot, in another essay, Levinas articulated how language signs may be utilized in poetry to dismantle concrete reality and enable movement toward another person.[[39]](#footnote-39) Inspired by Blanchot, Levinas described how poetic language generates symbolic movement “in the manner of the meta-language … which ‘unlocks’ the symbolism of writing.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

The language of poetry signals to its readers that there is meaning beyond that which is revealed by the regular codes of the linguistic system. By abandoning the customary way of giving meaning by means of a sign that references something specific, poetic language leads the reader to an understanding that there is language beyond regular language. This language, which in itself is an expression of alterity, points the reader to the understanding that there is a command that is not said explicitly, but that emerges from the reader’s willingness to encounter the other and to commit to him. As mentioned, sometimes the language of prose can also function in this way, as in Agnon’s case. Guided by Levinas’s ethical concepts, as well as with the aid of the key that literary language “unlocks the symbolism of writing,” I will seek to examine the development of moral sensibility in two parts of *See Under: Love*, “Momik” and “The Encyclopedia of the Life of Kazik.”

**Momik's Moral Development in *See Under: Love***

Grossman’s novels are full of characters of children, and Grossman has also written diverse children’s books that can be considered a distinct category of Hebrew children’s literature. Scholars have discussed children’s characters in both Grossman’s children’s literature and novels, especially in connection to parent-child relationships,[[41]](#footnote-41) but no study has focused specifically on the topic of education toward moral sensibility.[[42]](#footnote-42) In addition, a number of important studies have examined the ethical aspects of Grossman’s novels,[[43]](#footnote-43) including the intersection with Levinas’s concepts.[[44]](#footnote-44) Studies of *See Under: Love* specifically have included several discussions of its original treatment of aspects of the Holocaust, as well as a discussion of the character of the child as the “other.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Furthermore, in a collection of essays on *See Under: Love*, Olga Kaczmarek pointed to lines of similarity between Levinas’s understanding of language and the language of the main characters of the novel: ethics as the key to every encounter with the other, and the importance of the saying as opposed to the said, which is entailed in the search for “the traces of the Saying.”[[46]](#footnote-46)

Kaczmarek pointed to two points of comparison that underpin the interpretive move suggested here. Levinas expressed a complex attitude toward language: on the one hand, its mechanisms create a constancy that enables the giving of meaning and the understanding of meaning. On the other hand, a dialogic discourse is dynamic and living, constantly changes meaning, and enables a face-to-face encounter. Thus language contains the possibility of working morally.

**Sensitivity to Suffering as a Developmental Process**

**Filiality and Paternity, Translation and Responsibility**

Levinas’s ethical world view will serve as an interpretive key to understanding Momik’s moral development in the first part of the novel, as well as for understanding the existential view of Kazik, as it appears in the “Encyclopedia,” the last part of the novel. Momik’s character develops chronologically: this is not a developmental process that is cognitive or rational, but a process that begins with an unexpected encounter with a new face: “a new grandfather.”[[47]](#footnote-47) The grandfather is brought in an ambulance without prior warning to live with his family—at Momik’s parents’ house. It is interesting to see how the omniscient narrator distinguishes between the way the grandfather is perceived by the adults, and his first encounter with Momik, where the grandfather makes eye contact with him and winks.

On the very first page of the chapter, the **first stage** of the development of Momik’s moral sensibility occurs: an encounter with a “face” that arouses feelings of paternity and filiation in him. In contrast to his parents and to the neighbor, Bella, who see the grandfather as a burden that recalls a dark period for them, Momik sees the encounter with the grandfather as a possibility and an opportunity to understand what happened “Over There”: “Momik, who already knew he would call the old man Grandfather even though he was not his real grandfather told himself that if the old man did not die when Papa touched him, that must mean a person from Over There is safe from harm.”

Unlike his parents, who recoil from the grandfather, Momik immediately feels a familial connection with him, and this connection is directed toward saving his parents and his grandfather from the distress of the trauma they struggle to speak about, and from which they cannot be free. Momik develops paternal feelings for the grandfather, and takes care of him personally: he brings him lunch daily, gives him physical affection and tries to encourage him to talk. It is interesting to note here Levinas’s understanding of filiation, according to which “paternity” is a model for moral behavior, and does not have to be biological:

The fact of seeing the possibilities of the other as your own possibilities, of being able to escape the closure of your identity and what is bestowed on you, toward something that is not bestowed on you and which nevertheless is yours—this is paternity. This future beyond my own being, … takes on a concrete content in paternity. … Biological filiality is only the first shape filiality takes; but one can very well conceive filiality as a relationship between human beings without the tie of biological kinship. One can have a paternal attitude with regard to the other.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Levinas reformulated the concept of “filiation,” which in the French (*filialité*) means an inherited blood tie. Levinas defined such a relation as “a relation with a stranger who, entirely by being other, is me.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

Momik’s choice to act paternally toward his grandfather demonstrates that even a nine-year-old boy is able to act heteronomously.[[50]](#footnote-50) A significant part of this choice is his stubborn attempt to translate the grandfather’s incomprehensible language to comprehensible sayings. This is **the second stage of his moral development**, in which Momik translates the language of the “other.” This is not the first time that Momik applied his translation skills: he also did so with Grandma Henny who lived at their home and died, and he did so with anyone who struggled to understand his language:

Momik can translate just about anything. He is the translator of the royal realm. He can even translate nothing into something. Okay, that’s because he knows there’s no such thing as nothing, there must be some-thing, nu, that’s exactly like Grandfather Anshel, who also eats like a bird, peck and gulp, only slightly more frightenedly than Grandma Henny, probably because they had to eat so fast Over There, like the Jews in Egypt on the eve of Passover.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Momik engages in a dynamic dialogue with all of the characters: he is the only one who is able to communicate with his grandfather, although he has to translate his words; he engages in a daily dialogue with the elderly woman who owns a café, who is also a Holocaust survivor. However, Momik develops a special relationship with his grandfather and sees him as an author and a prophet, whose words must be urgently understood.[[52]](#footnote-52) Momik takes responsibility for the suffering of Holocaust survivors more than any adult mentioned in the story, a responsibility that is expressed in listening, translation, as well as physical attention. While doing so, Momik acquires an urgent need to understand what happened “Over There”; consequently, he will try to determine the identity of “the Nazi beast,” which Bella keeps mentioning. In his dreams he imagines that the Nazi beast cast a spell over “the land of There.” After Bella tells Momik that the Nazi beast can grow out of anyone, any person or any animal, Momik decides to try to foster the Nazi beast in his cellar, without revealing this to anyone. This is the point of transition between the **second stage** of moral development, in which the sense of responsibility is aroused, expressed in caring for the grandfather and in trying to recover the events of the Holocaust, to the **third stage** of moral development. At this stage, Momik’s empathy with the suffering of the survivors teaches him the hard way about the difference between suffering and useless suffering.

**The Inability to Remain Silent: Between Suffering and Useless Suffering**

“The war: contagion of sufferings, without explanation or consolation, which multiply a billion times” (9 February 1942).[[53]](#footnote-53) *Every survivor of the Hitlerian massacres*—*whether or not a Jew*—*is Other in relation to martyrs.* He is consequently responsible and unable to remain silent. He is obligated to Israel for the reasons that oblige every man.[[54]](#footnote-54)

This statement reflects Levinas’s complete commitment to the responsibility of Holocaust survivors towards those who were killed in it. In an essay devoted to the topic of “Useless Suffering,”[[55]](#footnote-55) Levinas analyzed the phenomenon, and portrayed Jewish Holocaust victims as unequivocally representing “Useless Suffering”:

The inhabitants of the Eastern European Jewish communities constituted the majority of the six million tortured and massacred; they represented the human beings least corrupted by the ambiguities of our world, and the million children killed had the innocence of children. Theirs is the death of martyrs …. The final act of this destruction is being accomplished today in the posthumous denial of the very fact of martyrdom by the would-be “revisionists of history.” Pain in its undiluted malignity, suffering for nothing.[[56]](#footnote-56)

As this suffering has been exacerbated by Holocaust deniers who have tried to revise history, Levinas firmly concluded that there exists a mandate to show responsibility toward the victims and to tell of the useless suffering they experienced. This responsibility is also encapsulated in the motto of his last book, *Otherwise than Being*.[[57]](#footnote-57) The meaning of responsibility is, among other things, the requirement to protest useless suffering, which was the fate of those who died. This book articulates a change in Levinas’s thinking about responsibility, from responsibility toward the other who is another person external to me,[[58]](#footnote-58) to the view that the very existence of the I is conditioned on one’s responsibility to the other. This changed view of responsibility can also illuminate the development that occurs in Momik’s character.

In the course of the story Momik passes from a sense of responsibility that is expressed in his desire to learn all he can about the Holocaust in order to understand his parents, to a sense of responsibility toward his grandfather, which includes a personal experience of fostering the “Nazi beast,” and obsessive learning about the events of the Holocaust, to that extent that he too experiences nightmares. Momik’s moral sensibility evolves, and from a “translator” and a “student” he becomes someone for whom the “other” is a part of himself.

According to Levinas, this sensibility consists of a responsibility to see the presence of the past in the present on a daily basis, by expressing responsibility for the suffering of others that was caused by their misfortune.[[59]](#footnote-59) The willingness of a person to be entirely passive, to be sensitive to the suffering of the other to the extent of real suffering himself, is the ultimate embodiment of responsibility.[[60]](#footnote-60) This responsibility entails vulnerability, “suffering of suffering,” and it enables discernment between suffering and useless suffering: the suffering of one who bears responsibility for the suffering of the other is an ethical mission, while the suffering caused to the millions of children in the Holocaust is the ultimate example of useless suffering. Levinas defined sensitivity to the suffering of the other as the starting point of human existence:[[61]](#footnote-61) however, suffering is an inseparable part of life for every person, and is not a “recompense” or the result of certain conduct. But alongside the recognition of suffering as a natural part of life, Levinas pointed to useless suffering, which should be confronted in retrospect and of course, prevented before it happens.

In order to understand the suffering of his parents and his grandfather, Momik actualizes the metaphor of “the Nazi beast”: he gathers several animals: a cat, a crow, a pigeon, and others, and decides to starve and imprison them until the Nazi beast emerges from them. When the beast does not emerge, he “reveals” what he has done to his grandfather, and brings him to the cellar, so that he would tell his story and cause the beast to emerge. The attempt ends tragically: Momik starts to develop hallucinations by day and nightmares by night, and not only does he fail to “save his parents” from their memory, he is expelled from his school and at the end of the year transferred to an institution. At the end of the story, when the grandfather hears that Momik was sent away from home, he disappears. To use Levinas’s language, it could be said that Momik himself caused useless suffering. Momik did not act constructively, continuing to show empathy to his grandfather and telling the story of the survivors (since Momik has an exceptional talent for writing); instead, the novel’s narrative reveals an important human perspective: that cruelty and abuse can emerge from anyone. The actualization of the metaphor “the Nazi beast” illustrates the claim of the neighbor Bella at the beginning of the story, when Momik did not understand her meaning, that the Nazi beast can erupt out of any person. The first part of the novel, “Momik,” moves on two axes simultaneously: on one axis, the narrative reflects moral development as described above. On a parallel axis, the narrative shows how even children of survivors can cause useless suffering. That is, even the closest proximity to Holocaust victims cannot protect someone from his own capability to cause useless suffering.

**Momik Is Kazik: Two Ways to Tell the Holocaust**

I have a story that is writing me, and I have to follow where it leads.[[62]](#footnote-62)

The last part of the novel is called “The Complete Encyclopedia of Kazik’s Life.” At an early part of the “Momik” section of the book, the grandfather calls Momik “Kazik,” and the reader understands this as an intratextual connection between the first and last parts of the novel. In the last part of the novel, it turns out that Kazik was a baby who lived a full life in the course of twenty-four hours at a concentration camp. Thus, Kazik was able to have a bird’s-eye view of all the events in the novel, and to formulate definitions to key terms in the experience of the Holocaust, which include insights and philosophical conclusions. The “Encyclopedia” also refers to the main characters of the second and third parts of the novel, the author Bruno Schultz and Anshel Wasserman (Momik’s grandfather), who escaped death several times at a concentration camp.[[63]](#footnote-63) To return to Levinas, elements of the encyclopedia entries bear close resemblance to Levinas’s insights, as, for example, in the entry for “suffering”:

SEVEL: SUFFERING—1. A weight, a burden, an affliction. 2. By analogy: pain, trouble, or distress. Physical or mental anguish. Wasserman says: The compass or lighthouse, the criterion for every human decision. Wasserman sees sensitivity to suffering and consciousness of it as the highest goal of mankind. Moreover, it is man’s protest, and the highest expression of his freedom. The measure of man’s humanity, in Wasserman’s opinion, is defined by the amount of suffering he succeeds in diminishing or preventing.[[64]](#footnote-64)

The encyclopedia lets us understand in retrospect the character of Momik’s grandfather during the war, as he defines the entry “suffering” and its importance in the most Levinasian fashion. Moreover, Wasserman emphasizes the importance of choice and freedom as a measure of humanity. The novel depicts an incomprehensible gap between the impressive character of Wasserman while he was at the camp and the broken vessel of a person that is described in the first part of the novel. It turns out that Wasserman was endowed with an astonishing moral sensibility, and therefore can define what it is: the ability to see suffering and to try to reduce it.

Another example of the complexity of the definitions in the encyclopedia can be seen in the entry:

ACHRAYUT: RESPONSIBILITY—The sense of duty.

In the heat of an argument between Wasserman and Neigel about whether Neigel’s murders in the camp could be considered “crimes,” Neigel declared that he was not personally responsible for what happened, that he was only following orders from the “Big Machine,” and reinforced this by saying that “the extermination of Jews here will continue even if one person, like myself, should decide to drop out.” … *Also see under:* CHOICE.

The entry for “responsibility” encapsulates a very difficult dilemma between the possibility of cooperating with the Nazis and saving oneself (represented by Neigel), at the cost of becoming a murderer, and the option to which Wasserman pointed. It is important to emphasize that the novel begins with the implications and results of Wasserman’s choice, which created trauma from which it was impossible to recover. Grossman’s choice to start the novel with the price that the survivors who refused to cooperate with the Nazis paid further magnifies the complexity of the novel.

In conclusion, it is important to point to the glaring irony throughout the encyclopedia, which is captured in the title of the novel. The framing of the chapter as an encyclopedia would appear to reflect order (alphabetical) and an exhaustive catalogue of all the relevant content, but in actuality, the selective choice of entries and their definitions undermines this order, casts doubt on it, and breaks it. This doubt is embodied in the hint in the name of the novel, *See Under: Love*. The title deceives the reader: it directs the reader to what is supposedly a central topic of the book, love. The title creates an expectation for a linguistic and existential discussion of love, whether as a response to hardship in the experience of the Holocaust or as a key to addressing its trauma. In the fourth part of the book, the encyclopedia, love is never defined. Instead of its definition there is a cross-reference to the entry: sex. Under the entry “sex” there is a cross-reference to the entry: love. That is, many existential questions remain unresolved at the end of the novel: What is the significance of love and what is the significance of sex in the lives of Holocaust survivors, even in the second generation, who have not dealt with the trauma of the Holocaust? Looking back, it is possible to see that the motivation driving Momik and Kazik is identical: both seek to trace the experience of the Holocaust from a personal and private perspective on the one hand, but also to formulate a larger perspective that would enable a comprehensive understanding of the events, on the other hand. Momik read an encyclopedia methodically, and wrote a fictional story. Kazik composed a selective encyclopedia, as demonstrated above regarding the title of the novel.

**Conclusion**

Levinas, as a Holocaust survivor, expressed his responsibility to protest the useless suffering that occurred in the Holocaust by articulating a complex ethical stance, which on the one hand emphasizes the significance of the events of the Holocaust, and on the other hand represents an aspiration for a universal ethics. The personal catastrophe Levinas experienced did not cause him to give up his faith in moral sensibility and in the free choice at its basis, but rather motivated him to articulate the key concepts presented above. Grossman’s novel contains a profound similarity to Levinas’s concepts, especially to the terms discussed above. However, the way in which the novel gives shape to the experience of the Holocaust through a variety of perspectives directs the reader to see the ethical choice as one possibility, important and central, but one that exists alongside suffering that has no constructive response. Momik’s character exemplifies the development of moral sensibility, but also the enormous difficulty and the failure to grasp and to accept the events of the Holocaust.

1. David Grossman, *See Under: Love*, trans. Betsy Rosenberg (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example: Marc De Kesel, [Bettine Siertsema](https://www.amazon.com/-/he/s/ref=dp_byline_sr_book_2?ie=UTF8&field-author=Bettine+Siertsema&text=Bettine+Siertsema&sort=relevancerank&search-alias=books), [Katarzyna Szurmiak](https://www.amazon.com/-/he/s/ref=dp_byline_sr_book_3?ie=UTF8&field-author=Katarzyna+Szurmiak&text=Katarzyna+Szurmiak&sort=relevancerank&search-alias=books), eds., *See Under: Shoah: Imagining the Holocaust with David Grossman* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Naomi Sokoloff, “David Grossman’s *See Under: Love*,” *Prooftexts* 35, no. 1 (2016): 1–12. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978), 89–90. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Grossman, *See Under: Love*,389. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “For Levinas, ethics is the compassionate response to the vulnerable, suffering Other.” William Edelglass, “Levinas on Suffering and Compassion,” *Sophia* 45, no. 2 (2006): 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ze'ev Levy, *Otherness and Responsibility: A Study of Emmanuel Levinas' Philosophy* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997) (in Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Theodor Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, eds., *Radicalizing Levinas* (New York: New York University Press, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Dorit Lemberger, “The Function of the ‘Face’ as a Conceptual Metaphor in Levinas's Ethics,” *Judaica Petropolitana* 11 (2019): 104–25. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [Bernhard Waldenfels](https://philpapers.org/s/Bernhard%20Waldenfels), “Levinas and the Face of the Other,” in [*The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*](https://philpapers.org/rec/BERTCC-11), ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 63–81. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Emmanuel Levinas, “Beyond Intentionality,” in *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 112–13. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” in *The Levinas Reader*,ed. S. Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, include year of the edition you used), 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “But this reduced consciousness—which, in reflecting upon itself, rediscovers and masters its own acts of perception and science as objects in the world, thereby affirming itself as self-consciousness and absolute being—also remains a non-intentional consciousness of itself, as though it were a surplus somehow devoid of any willful aim” (Ibid.). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (1961; Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “One has to respond to one's right to be, not by referring to some abstract and anonymous law, or judicial entity, but because of one's fear for the Other. … The proximity of the other is the face's meaning, and it means from the very start in a way that goes beyond those plastic forms which forever try to cover the face like a mask of their presence to perception. But always the face shows through these forms. Prior to any particular expression and beneath all particular expressions, which cover over and protect with an immediately adopted face or countenance, there is the nakedness and destitution of the expression as such, that is to say extreme exposure, defencelessness, vulnerability itself.”

    Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” 82–83. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. “It is the entry of the third party, a permanent entry, into the intimacy of the face to face. The concern for justice, for the thematizing, the kerygmatic discourse bearing on the said, from the bottom of the saying without the said, the saying as contact, is the spirit in society.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, include year of edition), 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Georges Hansel, “Ethics and Politics in Levinas's Thought,” in *Levinas in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2007), 143 (in Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Emmanuel Levinas, “No Identity,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1987), 146. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. “The sensibility … is vulnerability itself” (Ibid.). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 146–47. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michel B. Smith (London: Athlone, 1999), 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1977); Robert Eaglestone, *The Broken Voice: Reading Post-Holocaust Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Ted Cohen, “Literature and Morality,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Richard Eldridge(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 486–95. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Robbins, *Altered Reading*. This approach is also taken in the following essays: Gerald Bruns, “The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas’s Writings,” in Critchley and Bernasconi, Cambridge Companion to Levinas, 206–33; Hanoch Ben-Pazi, “Emmanuel Levinas: Hermeneutics, Ethics, and Art,” *Journal of Literature and Art Studies* 5, no. 8 (2015): 588–600. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Emmanuel Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” in Hand, *Levinas Reader*,130–43. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See, for example, Michael Fagenblat, “Introduction: Levinas and Literature, a Marvelous Hypocrisy,” in *Levinas and Literature*, ed. Michael Fagenblat and Arthur Cools(Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), ix–xxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. “It is of the essence of art to signify only between the lines—in the intervals of time, between times—like a footprint that would precede the step, or an echo preceding the sound of a voice” (Ibid., 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Blanchot wrote an important book that interrogated the nature of the literary space, in which he described how poetic language has the power to represent experience that diverges from realistic reality. See Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. A. Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Levinas, *Proper Names*, 129–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. “According to Blanchot a prior transcendence … is required in order for things to be able to be perceived as images, and language as poetry. In this sense, the image precedes perception” (Ibid., 130). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. “To give a sign, without its standing for anything. …Poetry, … transforms words—indices of a manifold, moments of a totality—into signs set free, that break through the walls of immanence, disrupting order. … To introduce a meaning into Being is to move from Same to the Other, from *I* to the other person; it is to give a sign, to undo the structures of language” (Ibid., 147). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Adivi-Shoshan Esti, “Just because of Me He Is My Father—On David Grossman’s Children’s Stories” (in Hebrew), ʿ*Olam katan* [Small World]*: Journal for the Study of Literature for Children and Youth* 5 (2014): 90–116; Baram Eshel Einat, “Fatherhood, Childcare, and Leadership in David Grossman's Literature for Children,” *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2020): 145–60; Darr Yael, “Intergenerational Dependencies in Modern Children’s Literature: The Israeli Case” (in Hebrew), ʿ*Olam katan* ]Small World]*: Journal for the Study of Literature for Children and Youth* 3 (2007): 13–30. On the image of the child in the novel *To the End of the Land* see Ann Golomb-Hoffman, “The Body of the Child, the Body of the Land: Trauma and ‘Nachträglichkeit’ in David Grossman's *To the End of the Land*,” *Narrative* 20, no. 1 (2012): 43–63. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. A preliminary discussion of this topic can be found in Dorit Lemberger, “‘I Am in Some Way My Child’: A Study, Inspired by Levinas, of the Stages in the Development of an Ethical Stance in David Grossman's Works for Young Readers” (in Hebrew), *Criticism and Interpretation* 46 (2020): 275–300. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Iris Milner has written about the ethical aspect of the father figure in the novel *See Under: Love* in her essay, “Momik, yeled nisraf: ʾetikah shel traumaʾ be-‘Momik’ me-’et David Grossman,” ʾ*Ot: Ktav ʿet le-sifrut ve-teʾoriyah* 2 (2012): 191–210. Adia Mendelsohn Maoz has written on the ethical aspect in Grossman’s work in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in Borders, Territories, and Ethics: Hebrew Literature in the Shadow of the Intifada (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Idit Alphandary, “The Ethics of Lévinas’s *Temimut* and Kristeva’s Abjection in *To the End of the Land* by David Grossman,” *The New Centennial Review* 14, no. 3 (2014): 183–218. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Sheila E. Jelen, “Salvage Poetics in S*ee Under: Love*: Momik, Mottel and a Yiddish Post-Vernacular in Israeli Literature,” *Prooftexts* 35, no. 1 (2015): 48–57; Naomi Sokoloff, “David Grossman: Translating the ‘Other’ in ‘Momik,’” in *Israeli Writers Consider the Outsider*,ed. Leon Yudkin (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1993), 37–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Olga Kaczmarek, “Guerrilla War with Words—The Language of Resistance to the Shoah,” in De Kesel, Siertsema, and Szurmiak, *See Under: Shoah*, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Grossman, *See Under: Love*, page number? [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard Cohen

    (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 70–71. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. For an emphasis on the heteronomic aspect in the understanding of compassion and responsibility that Levinas formulated, see Edelglass, “Levinas on Suffering and Compassion.” [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. This footnote was empty in the Hebrew version. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Grossman, *See Under: Love*, page number? [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*,trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 42. Levinas quoted from the journal of a friend on the nature of war. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. M. Smith and B. Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 91–102. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid., 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Levinas dedicated this book “to the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism” (Ibid). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. The earlier view is found, for instance, in his book *Totality and Infinity*. See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 187–201. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. “The relationship with a past that is on the hither side of every present and every representable …, is included in the extraordinary and everyday event of my responsibility for the faults or the misfortune of others, in my responsibility that answers for the freedom of another.” Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*,10. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. “The subjectivity of subjection of the self is the suffering of suffering, the ultimate offering oneself, or suffering in the offering of oneself. Subjectivity is vulnerability, is sensibility. Sensibility, all the passivity of saying, cannot be reduced to an experience that a subject would have of it, even if it makes possible such an experience. An exposure to the other, it is signification, is signification itself, the-one-for-the-other to the point of substitution, but a substitution in separation, that is, responsibility.” Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*,54–55; my emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. “For Levinas, ethics is the compassionate response to the vulnerable, suffering Other.” Edelglass, “Levinas on Suffering and Compassion,” 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Grossman, *See Under: Love*, 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. For an important discussion of collaborators with the Nazis in the novel, see Or Rogovin, “From ‘German Wolfhounds’ to ‘Ordinary People’: Characterizations of Holocaust Perpetrators in Israeli Fiction,” *New German Critique* 46, no. 2 (2019): 65–89. The article’s focus is on humanized individuals, whose vulnerability and multidimensionality may blur the divide between victims and victimizers. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Grossman, *See Under: Love*, 346–47. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)