

Ella Minnow Pea: A Progressively Lipogrammatic Epistolary Fable Study Guide

Ella Minnow Pea: A Progressively Lipogrammatic Epistolary Fable by Mark Dunn

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Ella Minnow Pea: A Progressively Lipogrammatic Epistolary Fable Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Ella Minnow Pea: A Progressively Lipogrammatic Epistolary Fable.....	4
Style.....	11

Plot Summary

Ella Minnow Pea is an eighteen year-old girl who lives on the small island of Nollop with her parents Gwenette and Amos. Ella's cousin Tassie and Tassie's mother Mittie also live on the island. Nollop is an independent island nation located just off the coast of South Carolina. Its population is diverse and the tight-knit society experiences little or no strife. Nollop was founded on the principle of equality for all shortly before the American Civil War and it remains peaceful, if isolated.

Nollopians prize language and its proper use above all. The people living on Nollop are not fond of modern technology and because of a recent hurricane, telephone service is inconsistent at best. Nollopians as a rule do not use computers with any regularity. There is a university on the island. Most of the inhabitants are avid readers and letter-writers. The love of the written word is instilled in Nollopians from an early age.

In the square in the middle of the town of Nollopton stands a statue of the island's most prominent citizen, Nevin Nollop. To those living on the tiny 63 square-mile land mass, Nollop is a hero. Approximately one hundred years ago, Nevin Nollop wrote a sentence which used every letter of the English language. His pangram, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog" is proudly displayed for all to see and revere. One day, the tile bearing the letter "Z" falls from the cenotaph and life on the island of Nollop changes forever.

The High Island Council, Nollop's governing body, believes that the falling of the cenotaph tile is a sign. The Council believes that Nevin Nollop is communicating with them from beyond the grave. The members of the Council interpret the falling of the tile to mean that Nollop wishes them to discontinue use of the letter "Z" and they forbid the islanders to ever use "Z" again. Those using the letter "Z" once will be reprimanded, publicly flogged or put in the head-stocks. Some will be banished, others will be put to death if they refuse exile.

Ella Minnow Pea, her family, and neighbors tell the story of what happens on the island of Nollop through a series of letters. Each letter reveals the gradual breakdown of language, communication, and meaning on Nollop. As more tiles fall from the hundred year-old cenotaph, tensions mount, and each day people are punished and banished with alarming swiftness and increasing cruelty. The High Council begins taking over the land and property of those who are exiled and Nevin Nollop becomes their god.

Ella, Tassie, Mittie, and the others are confused and outraged at the happenings on their beloved island. It soon becomes clear that no one individual will be able to stop the High Island Council's figurative march toward linguistic totalitarianism.



Ella Minnow Pea: A Progressively Lipogrammatic Epistolary Fable

Summary

Ella Minnow Pea is the story of a small island located just off the coast of South Carolina. The island is an autonomous nation which asserted its independence from the U.S. in the mid-eighteenth century. In the Nollopton town center is a cenotaph positioned near a statue of Nevin Nollop, after whom the island is named. The sentence on the cenotaph reads, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." Since there is limited telephone service on the island — the result of a recent hurricane — the islanders have taken to writing letters. When letters begin to fall from the 100 year-old cenotaph, Nollopian society begins to unravel as letters and language slowly begin to disappear.

Ella Minnow Pea writes to tell her cousin Tassie Purcy that one of the letters from the cenotaph fell to the ground and shattered. A youngster by the name of Alice Butterworth takes the broken pieces to the High Island Council. The High Island Council is the governing body of Nollop.

Ella lives with her parents, Gwenette and Amos. Ella works as a laundress. She and most of her co-workers believe that the tile fell off the cenotaph simply because of age - the cenotaph has been in the center of town for 100 years. Ella lives in the city of Nollopton, her cousin Tassie Purcy lives in Nollopville on the other side of the island with Ella's aunt, Mittie Purcy. Land speculators from the mainland have expressed an interest in turn the island into a travel destination for cruise ships.

The island is named after Nevin Nollop. After supposedly writing the famous pangram, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog," Nollop's status on the small island was elevated to that of a demigod.

The High Island Council refuses to allow the letter "Z" tile to be refastened to the cenotaph. The High Council believes that the falling of the letter "Z" is an omen. They believe that Nevin Nollop speaks from beyond the grave. Nollop does to want the people on the island to use the letter "Z" anymore. This is the beginning of the end of language on Nollop.

The High Island Council decides that anyone using the letter "Z" will first be punished by reprimand. A second offense means will result in public flogging or being placed in the stocks in the center of town. A third offense would constitute banishment from the island. Those refusing to leave the island will be put to death.

Ella, Gwenette, and Amos Minnow Pea plan to throw a neighborhood farewell party for the letter "Z". The islanders have approximately two weeks to use the letter "Z" before



the Council's edict takes effect. At this stage, the Nollopians are not entirely convinced that the Council will carry out punishments.

Tassie is alarmed at the Council's harsh measures. The tone of her letter is somewhat sarcastic.

Tassie writes to Ella that removal of "Z" from all communications is an antiquated and potentially dangerous development. Tassie sees the High Council as militaristic.

She reminds Ella that with "Z" being outlawed, any books containing the letter "Z" will have to be removed from the shelves of the public library.

Tassie is unable to attend Ella's farewell to "Z" party because of hazardous road conditions on the island. With the recent hurricanes on Nollop, it has become increasingly difficult for the Nollopians to travel from one side of the island to the other.

Tassie purposely misspells a few words, inserting the letter "Z: as a matter of principle.

Tassie closes her letter by telling Ella that she has a right to use whichever letters she chooses, whenever she chooses to do so.

Amos Minnow Pea, a sometime carpenter and maker of ceramic vessels, has decided to start making only "diminutive moonshine jugs" for doll houses (12). Amos says that he will purchase snacks as well as something delicious for dinner. Amos says that he will not be purchasing any fish. Apparently, the Minnow Peas are tired of eating fish for dinner.

On page 13, Ella responds to Tassie's letter just before the Nollopian ban on the letter "Z" goes into effect.

The ban does not apply to people under seven years of age.

At the party, Nollopians write down all the words they can think of which contain the letter "Z" and burn them in a salad bowl made by Amos Minnow Pea.

Ella tells Tassie that all books with the letter "Z" have vanished.

"ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ*"

"The quick brown fox jumps over the la*y dog"

An asterisk now replaces the letter "Z".

On page 17, Tassie writes to Ella that the library has been closed permanently.

Tassie's mother, Mittie Purcy, a second grade teacher, says that the textbooks have all been confiscated.



Tassie's mother's students are confused by the removal of the letter "Z" and they are not permitted to discuss it at home or at school.

Seventeen people on Tassie's side of the island have already been charged with their first offense using "Z".

Mr. Gregory, a dairy farmer and beekeeper, has already been placed in the stocks in the center of town. One cannot discuss bees without the letter "Z". Bees buzz, after all.

Willy Creevy, who has used "Z" twice, has chosen flogging as his punishment.

Ella tells Tassie that sixty men, women, and children have already committed their first offense. Two of the people's names were not published in the island newspaper because their names contain the forbidden letter "Z".

Radio broadcasts have been suspended on the island and the publisher of the Island Tribune has two strikes against him already.

Amos and Gwenette Minnow Pea still use the letter "Z" in private conversation but Ella is feeling progressively more paranoid about being caught.

Neighbors have been turning one another in to the authorities for using the letter "Z".

Tassie writes to inform Ella that Willy Creevy has been banished from Nollop forever.

Tassie says that Creevy's mother will address the PTA the next evening. Tassie says that the meeting will be well-attended by those who disagree with the Council's punitive actions.

The next day, Ella tells Tassie that the letter "Q" has fallen from the cenotaph and that the High Island council is having a top secret meeting. Ella hopes the council will come to its senses soon.

There has been no phone service on the island for the past thirteen months.

Tassie recounts the details of the PTA meeting to Ella.

Willy Creevy's mother forced him to board the trawler which took him to exile on the mainland. And although it was the most painful thing she had ever done, Mrs. Creevy knew that it was the only way to save Willy's life.

Tassie says that on her side of the island there is minimal radio reception and that now the radio station only broadcasts instrumental music.

Ella writes to tell Tassie that use of the letter "Q" is now prohibited.

Mr. Kleeman, publisher of the Island Tribune, has decided to cease publication of the island's only newspaper. Kleeman, whose whole family has lived on Nollop since its



earliest days, chooses to leave the island rather than witness the disintegration of Nollopian society.

The library has re-opened without the offending books, Ella says, even though most of the books have been removed.

Tassie becomes a volunteer teaching assistant at the elementary school.

Tassie and her mother Mittie have begun corresponding via letter, even when they are both at home.

Tassie tells Ella that Mittie has committed her first offense. It seems that Mittie was teaching an arithmetic lesson and forgot that twelve eggs are referred to as a dozen.

One of Mittie's students, Timmy Towgate, tells his parents about Mittie's misspeak and the parents informed the school board. Mittie is deeply ashamed and Tassie is worried about her.

Ella's hours at the launderette have increased substantially, she tells Tassie. Those leaving the island insist on taking only "the most spanking clean clothes" with them (35).

ABCDEFGHIJKLMONP*RSTUWXYZ*

"The *uick brown fox jumps over the la*y dog"

Tassie writes a letter to Timmy Towage's parents about turning her mother Mittie in for using the letter "Z".

Tassie informs Mr. and Mrs. Towgate that she believes it was cruel of them to inform on Mittie especially since Mittie treats Timmy so well. Tassie points out to the boy's parents that Timmy is a restive student and a not too bright.

Nash Towgate, Timmy's father, responds to Tassie's query by telling Tassie that he and his wife were merely doing their civic duty in turning Mittie in to the Council.

The Towgates believe, as does the High Island Council, that Nevin Nollop is communicating with the islanders from beyond the grave and that Tassie and Mittie would do well to watch their step.

Nate Warren writes to Mittie Purcy. Warren is an academic and the publisher of a small journal dedicated entirely to Nollopian culture and history.

Nate Warren has been in contact with recently-exiled Willy Creevy and is interested in visiting the island to cover the recent letter-banning activities. Mittie Purcy agrees to allow Nate to stay at her home, with Warren posing as an old friend of the family so as not to provoke suspicion among the other islanders.



Ella writes Tassie of the public flogging of the entire Rasmussen family - including their nine year-old twin girls, Becka and Henrietta.

Ella and her parents, along with other islanders, watched in horror as all six family members were punished for making quacking sounds a High Island Council meeting the previous week.

Ella informs Tassie that she and her parents are going to hold a secret meeting in order to devise a solution to the High Island council's tyranny.

Creighton O'Looley is being held without bond for trying to replace one of the fallen letter tiles.

In a letter to Mittie Purcy, Nate Warren reveals that the letter "J" has recently fallen from the cenotaph.

Warren informs Mittie that he will arrive on Nollop in exactly ten days, on September 18.

Warren says that chemists on the mainland have examined the adhesive used on the cenotaph tiles (by way of fragments smuggled off the island). The chemists determine that the remainder of the cenotaph tiles will fall within a year.

Nate Warren asks Mittie to identify the council member she trusts the most to read the chemists' report.

The High Island Council dispatches a letter to the residents of Nollop, spelling out the Council's position on the fallen tiles. The letter reads like a document of religious legalism. In it, the Council elevates Nevis Nollop to the status of a god, calling Nollop "Omnipotent. Omniscient. Omniglorious" (56).

Analysis

The letter Ella Minnow Pea writes to her cousin Tassie Purcy opens the narrative. By way of Ella's explanation, the reader finds out about the recent happenings on the island of Nollop. And although it does not develop into a major plot point, it is interesting to note that the U.S. land developers are unaware of the rich culture that exists on the island. Therefore, to the United States, Nollop is simply another beautiful place which could be used, exploited, to make money.

Ella's first letter sets the tone for the remainder of the novel. At this point, there is limited telephone service on the island because of hurricanes. It does seem, however, that writing letters to one another is not a new phenomenon on the island.

The first introduction of Nevin Nollop as the originator of the famous pangram and a pillar of the community foreshadows Nate's revelation of Nollop as an egocentric boor in the second section.



The High Island Council's surprising decision to prohibit the use of the letter "Z" begins a slippery slope. The decision to punish its constituents for the use of the last letter of the alphabet is capricious at best. The decision is based on superstition, which takes the place of religious faith. It seems inordinately punitive to put people to death for refusing to leave Nollop. What begins as disbelief in everyday Nollopians quickly turns into shock.

Tassie Purcy, Ella Minnow Pea's cousin, is introduced in this section. Tassie is somewhat more flippant in her response to the Council's new rules. And while she and Ella are the same age, within a few months of one another, Ella is represented as being more mature than her cousin.

The fact that the main road on the island is impassable is the first narrative occurrence of the theme of isolation.

Amos Minnow Pea, Ella's father, is also introduced in this first section. Amos is also a letter-writer, although he is not as prolific as his daughter.

This opening section of the narrative has a humorous undertone which serves to balance the severity of the High Island Council's letter-use rules. For instance, children under the age of seven are not to be punished for using prohibited letters. This edict foreshadows what occurs in a later section when adults use children under seven to transcribe their sentences for them.

The asterisk makes its first appearance in the narrative as a substitute for banned letters. As the narrative progresses, the asterisk comes to symbolize oppression and persecution.

Punishments are carried out swiftly and in large numbers. The rapidity with which the islanders are punished increases as the narrative goes on.

This opening section also features the first act of purposive rebellion by one of the islanders. Willy Creevy consciously chooses to break the rules. In this way, Creevy becomes the island's first anti-High Island Council activist. Others begin to follow suit in the subsequent sections of the novel. Also at this point, the underground subversive movement on Nollop begins. Creevy's disobedience foreshadows Rory Cummel's run-in with the High Island Council in Section Three.

The departure of Mr. Kleeman, publisher of the island's only newspaper, is emblematic of language leaving the island as well. The theme of isolation broadens, as the islanders are left without a news source. From this point on, the letters that Ella and the others send to one another become the only vehicle by which to share news.

Nate Warren and the Towgate family are all introduced in this section.

The High Island Council's grip on the Nollopians tightens as of Creighton O'Looley's arrest and detention for trying to re-fasten one of the tiles.

The voice of reason enters the narrative in the form of the chemists' findings on the cenotaph adhesive.

The High Island Council's actions flout religious teachings by calling Nevin Nollop



Style

Point of View

Description

Setting

Description

Language and Meaning

Description

Structure

Description