

## Rosario Castellanos: Judge of the Ignorant

In Rosario Castellanos' poem "Memorandum on Tlatelolco", the speaker of the poem takes on a role of advocate, to be a voice in place of the silence, shine light on what is in the darkness and make significant those the government tries to erase in the tragedy. One of the primary ways the poem conveys the impact of the massacre is through the overarching themes of silence and darkness. Each of the themes are used to draw attention to blissful ignorance of the inhabitants of Tlatelolco, as well others who may be willfully blind to tragedies such as the massacre.

Castellanos initially creates a situation for her speaker as a judge for the people with her choice of title. She chooses the word "Memorandum" which alludes to a judicial report. The poem serves as a record in place of the missing reports. Rosario writes in lines 14-18, "the newspapers / featured the weather report / and on television, over the radio, at the movies, / there was not a single change of program, / no interrupting news flash." The poem itself becomes the court hearing that never took place on behalf of the injustice of the students who lost their lives.

These lines also show darkness as a tool to cover what is done through the violence of the massacre as portrayed in the opening of the poem: "Darkness engenders violence / and violence invokes darkness / to jell in crime" (lines 1-3). Castellanos draws parallels between violence and darkness. Both must be present in order for crime to have a place. She continues in lines 4-6, "That is why October the second waited until night / so that no one saw the hand that clutched / the weapon, but only its sequel of lightning." The scene creates invisibility to hide the crime. Darkness conceals the killer and the weapons used, but does not mask the consequences of death. The darkness removes evidence of the bodies in the streets, so that "The plaza dawned swept clean" (line 14). The bodies concealed in the darkness speak to the

sense that the individuals are unimportant in comparison to those involved in committing the crime.

Darkness also serves as a state of unconsciousness. Castellanos reveals this in lines 26-28, "violence invokes darkness / because darkness engenders dream / and we can sleep dreaming that we can dream." Darkness gives an opportunity for people to "dream" for life to get better. The speaker once again employs darkness as a covering, this time for blissful ignorance. As line 18 states, "we can sleep dreaming that we can dream." The audience is conveniently unaware of the tragedy. Oblivious of what has happened, the audience does not have to make a choice in how to respond. These lines allow the audience to naïvely continue believing that everything is fine. It allows the opportunity to dream that the world will only get better. The speaker, however, is shaking those asleep, shouting. The world is not okay.

Castellanos contrasts darkness with light in order to expose deceit. The poem's opening shrouds the gunmen in darkness, hiding their weapons. What the audience sees is the "sequel of lightning" (line 6). The light creates evidence that the consequences of pulling the trigger are something that can't be ignored. In spite of a clean swept plaza void of evidence come morning, there is enough light for the speaker's questions. In lines 7-13, the repeated question of "who are they?" beginning first with the identity of the person shooting, "who is it? Who is killing?" (line 7). She finishes on the resounding question of who has died, "who are in agony, who are dying?" (line 8). The same way she repeats the question of "who," she also repeats another question. This question is almost an answer to the previous; she writes "The ones who will end up in jailpens? / The ones who are rotting in hospitals?" (lines 10 and 11). With the space created in the milliseconds before the bullets hit, "in that brief vivid light," (line 7) the biggest question from the speaker in the final line of that stanza is asked, "The ones who keep silent forever, out of fear? / Who? Who are they?" (lines 12 and 13). This question is at the heart of how the speaker is responding to the massacre.

This question is a challenge to not be afraid of speaking out, to not stay silent. The questions shine light on the truth of the massacre. Towards the end of the poem Castellanos writes, "This is our way of helping dawn to break / upon so many stained consciences... upon the face shielded behind the mask" (lines 33-36). To shed light upon the guilty, and hold them accountable, the event requires remembrance. To free the speaker and the audience alike from the war within themselves of remaining silent, they must speak out about injustice.

The silence has a dual role in the poem. Earlier in the poem, Castellanos points out that there are those who will stay silent forever, and in the same line poses the question, "who will stay silent out of fear?" (line 13). The first part of the question evokes the understanding that there are the dead who will remain silent forever, yet the second part adds "out of fear" as if to say, *what are we going to do about it? People are dead and dying, the crime is being covered up, are we going to just stand by and allow it to happen?*

This theme of silence appears later in the poem as well. In the fourth stanza, Castellanos explains that there were no reports of the massacre in the headlines, on radio or television. As Castellanos is describing the aftermath of the event from the perspective of the public eye, she writes, "no interrupting news flash or even a / moment of silence at the banquet" (lines 18 and 19). Many cultures consider offering a moment of silence to remember and mourn the loss of the dead as an appropriate practice. Portraying the opposite, the issue falls silent. Castellanos reveals meaningless chatter of radios and televisions. In doing so, she makes it clear to the audience that words and noise that do matter are not being addressed. Ironically, the silence speaks volumes. It is a dishonor to the lives lost. Once again, the speaker takes on a voice to counter the silence as she feels it is her duty and honor to advocate for those who have died.

Instead of offering a moment of silence to show respect for the dead, Castellanos writes, "Everything has been rendered as an offering to a goddess: / to the Devourer of Excrement" (lines 22 and 23). It is clear that the speaker views the response to such a tragedy as bullshit. It is an injustice. The term "excrement" literally means "bodily waste" and the use of the term in

this poem once again allows for a dual purpose. Not only is the speaker's anger evident, but reveals the attitude of the government and the way they have disposed of the bodies without any proper burial or dignity of remembrance. At dawn the streets are swept clean (line 14), revealing an attitude that these lives don't matter enough to give them any sort of dignified death. The audience must be aware of the details of what happened the night of the massacre. If they are not, those who have died, did so in vain.

The entire poem culminates in the speaker pleading for justice, for remembrance. She is begging for dignity for those affected, because every life matters. In the final stanzas, Castellanos writes, "I touch an open wound: my memory. / It hurts therefore it is true. It bleeds real blood. / Yet if I call it mine I betray them all" (lines 30-31). The speaker feels the impact of the massacre, even with the memory of it. No matter how much time has passed, the pain is very real. There must be a place for her feelings to be felt for what they are, "it bleeds real blood." This heartache of the massacre is not something she can simply own for herself, because many feel it too. Castellanos proclaims, "I remember, we remember" (line 32). The event deserves to be remembered for the sake of everything lost. Castellanos ends the poem with "I remember, we must remember / until justice be done among us" (lines 37 and 38). In order for there to be justice for the lives lost, there must be a memorandum—a record, a memory and above all, a conversation about the massacre of October 2, 1968.

Through the poem, through the Memorandum, the speaker carries a voice that is not limited to the event itself but continues to speak of the pain left in its wake for generations yet to come. The voice is a plea to the audience, to remember those lost, but also to somehow keep such events to happen again. Castellanos makes her audience keenly aware that the crime itself was kept quiet in the midst of the noise and chatter of the media. She reveals that the bodies were concealed from the eyes of the people the following morning. She continues to shine light the ways that the darkness of the night hid the event itself through the poem. If the speaker does not voice the injustice, nothing will ever change.