

Third Annual Center for German Studies Essay Competition, 2010/11
First Prize Winner:

Diana E. Galindo

The Role of the Bystander in Christa Wolf's Patterns of Childhood

In *Patterns of Childhood*, by Christa Wolf, the narrator's fragmented perspective is a symptom of her struggle to break free of the role of the voiceless bystander. The protagonist is plagued by guilt at her helpless inaction in the face of the horrors that she is forced to witness as a child in Nazi Germany. Dreams enable the narrator to unearth her subconscious fear of the bystander's role, and writing allows her to combat this guilt by reconciling the divided adult narrator and childhood self.

The protagonist's suppressed trauma fragments her point of view; she splits into the present-day adult narrator and the war-era childhood self, Nelly. The speaker refers to Nelly in the third person, rendering her a separate character worthy of scrutiny. Nelly watches as Jews are victimized and peers are publicly shamed, yet she does not intervene because she does not understand that which she is witnessing. As a child, Nelly is indoctrinated with love for the Fuhrer and German nationalist sentiment; however, when she cannot muster sincere, wholehearted support for the publicly-condoned victimization and violence perpetrated in the name of the Fuhrer, Nelly's inner conflict negates her ability to act. She becomes a bystander when "one side of Nelly spoke to the other side, because she had developed the habit of watching herself walk and talk and act, which meant that she had to judge herself incessantly. It often kept her from talking freely, from taking action when it was necessary" (228). Nelly is voiceless and helpless; because she can no longer distinguish her own morality from that of her society, she is unable to make the choice to act either in accordance with or in opposition to the regime, and must simply watch.

Nelly's role as a bystander pursues her even after the collapse of the Fuhrer and his social doctrine. As she flees with her family into the countryside, "Nelly can't understand why nobody, not a single person among the refugees, went over to the almost completely starved figures and held out a piece of bread" (324). Unable to resolve the conflict between her instinct and others' inaction, she is rendered a powerless witness to starvation. During the Russian occupation, Nelly is assigned to supervise as clinicians inspect every German woman in the village for venereal diseases; the women's humiliation wounds Nelly deeply, and "she no longer seemed to know herself. She loathed the oilcloth-covered sofa on which

the women lay down, one after the other, as though on a conveyor belt. She didn't know what to do with her rage" (368). The protagonist's fear of becoming the helpless bystander stems from these childhood experiences; in order to heal her wounds, she must reconcile her present-day self with Nelly. Until she can accomplish this unity, her perspective remains divided and conflicted. Nelly, as "the motionless observer, cast an impenetrable shadow onto herself which as shall be seen, was harder to dissolve than the pale furtive shadows of enemy planes overhead" (319). This "impenetrable shadow" remains buried in her subconscious; the adult narrator first exhumes it through dreams.

The adult narrator experiences numerous traumatic dreams in which she is forced to witness or experience horrors that she can neither change nor affect. These dreams are subconscious symbols of the protagonist's residual guilt that develops through her childhood role as a bystander to the horrors of the Holocaust; they serve as the connection point between the narrator and her childhood self. The majority of the narrator's dreams feature her watching while another person suffers; an invalid lies prostrate in a burning house while the speaker is told not to act because "there is no fire" (34); a woman runs from a murderous man, while the speaker sluggishly looks on (72); and a young girl suffers terribly from insects stuck in her eyes, while the narrator observes dispassionately (259). Other dreams feature the narrator as the victim of atrocities, rather than as the distant observer. The protagonist dreams of her "own gradual irreversible dying, and the indifference of others" (211). This role reversal is symbolic of her conflicted, paradoxical role as a witness to the Holocaust; her helplessness simultaneously victimizes and implicates her in the atrocities. Dreams in which she is the victim while others watch reveal her subconscious guilt of having once played the role of the spectator; she unearths fears that Nelly buried in her subconscious long ago when, forced to play the role of the bystander, the child suppresses her inner trauma. The adult is able to access these emotions in a dream state.

The inability to speak or take meaningful action is a pervasive motif throughout these nighttime images, and causes more trauma than the actual atrocities that her dream-self is forced to witness. In a dream of a tortured victim who has no mouth with which to speak, the narrator envisions "what the torturers ought to do in order to attain their end: make the mute man write. And you had stood by, paralyzed, tied to the role of spectator; and couldn't step forward to come to the aid of the victim" (171). As a witness to the brutality, the speaker has an obligation to help the mute man and relieve his suffering; the fact that she does not implicates her in the torture. However, the speaker's inability to intervene also renders her a victim; her trauma stems from her own helplessness. This dream links

the narrator with Nelly, her childhood self, who repeatedly witnesses the suffering of others but is unable to mitigate it. In the dream, writing is the remedy for voicelessness; because the man has no mouth, he must use a pen and paper. This predicament symbolizes the narrator's own conflict; as a child, Nelly suppresses her fear and depression, becoming numb rather than responding to the numerous shocks and traumas that characterize her experience of war. The solution to this emotional repression is, as an adult, to confront the trauma through written expression.

Writing serves as a conscious attempt to penetrate the guilt of the subconscious and interrogate the childhood bystander. Through her writing, the narrator is able to examine and reinterpret the guilt that expresses itself through dreams. Nelly's role as a bystander has left residual preoccupations lurking in the protagonist's subconscious, brought to the surface in dreams. The inability to write or speak represent her ultimate subconscious fear; she dreams "all the stages of an operation in the course of which your right hand—the writing hand—is being expertly taken off, under local anesthesia, while you witness everything" (30). The narrator is helpless to intervene as outside forces enact the ultimate devoicing by removing her ability to write. By examining her life through writing, the narrator is able to assert that "nothing is more repulsive to you than the thought of a person being beaten, and unable to defend himself, while others look on—there are almost always those who look on—and do nothing about it" (183). She attempts to free Nelly from the role of the bystander by finally speaking out and bearing witness to the atrocities that passed before Nelly's eyes.

The protagonist's point of view is divided into the adult narrator, addressed in the second person, and the childhood self, referred to in the third person. Writing becomes a tool with which the protagonist strives to unite her fragment perspectives; "the final point would be reached when the second and the third person were to meet again in the first or, better still, were to meet with the first person" (349). This "final point" can only occur when the narrator, the second person, breaks out of the bystander role that Nelly, the third person, has established. The protagonist takes action; she exposes the truth of her own unwillingness or inability to speak out during the Nazi regime, and explores the role of the German population as bystanders to atrocities. Through this literary expression, the narrator tears herself away from the role of the spectator, and transforms herself into the proactive, world-changing Speaker.

Works Cited

Wolf, Christa. *Usule Molinaro and Hedwig Rappolt, trans. Patterns of Childhood (formerly A Model Childhood)*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980.