

In Praise of Local 100 by Martin Espada

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Introduction:

This is a poem by an acclaimed poet, Martin Espada, that honors the forty-three members of Local 100 who died in the 9/11 attacks. The workers were placed in the North Tower, along with the windows of the World restaurant of the World Trade Center building.

Thesis Statement

The poem depicts the power to fight back against the darkness and evil, and how to yearn for a peaceful life.

BODY-A.

The first two stanzas describe the quick movements of the workers and their vigilance and dedication to their work. The poet animates their actions with the metamorphic music of bread and eggs by a cook from Fajardo.

The poet associates the blue eyes of the cook with the American and Spanish invasion of Puerto Rico. The poet resembles the “oye” written upon the shoulder of the cook as an exclamation that shares its tint with many other languages of the world. The poet does not limit the term “oye” to one culture or nation as he deems it to be universal.

BODY-B

In the poet’s next sketch, he shares the personal experiences of the labor movements that occurred in the Caribbean during the 1970’s. The poet associates the “roll call” of the workers with remembrance of the immigrants and migrants during the labor movement. Espada intentionally avoids giving any comment on the attack on the Twin Towers as he wants to discuss the diversity of the labor struggle instead.

MAIN THEME:

The poet wants to divert our attention from the apparent tragedy towards a deeper meaning of the sacrifice of the labor in that incident. He wants to direct our imagination to the fact that it is the labor

that suffers in actuality in every major military campaign, trade, or agrarian agreement. By unifying the diversity in labor, he wants to point out that the struggle for labor is universal in nature.

Discussion

The poem “*Alabanza*” is structured into the proper structure of seven parts, where the first six parts are inclusive of sections of previous poetry written by Espada. The last part includes the latest seventeen poems written by Espada. Six poems were specifically compiled into *Alabanza*, depicting most of Espada’s literary work. Accredited as one of the renowned Latino poets of his time, Espada pens down his emotional response to the event of 9/11. He found himself deprived of words and shocked at the gruesome scene of 9/11, especially more so after he realized the deaths of so many immigrant workers who were working by the windows of the World Restaurant. The sheer preview into the oncoming death, picturing their emotional condition, still haunts him, and as such, he conveyed his emotions through the words in *Alabanza* in an attempt to relate what those workers may have felt.

The structure of the poem is divided into numerous portions, each representing a unique perspective by being deliberately irregular to keep the reader engaged as the scenario develops with each stanza. Throughout the poem, each stanza is analyzed to initiate a new rhythm, directing the reader towards a new direction. The selection of the word “*Alabanza*” as the title actually translates to “praise” in Spanish, although Espada’s interpretation of this word in the poem is to indicate his praise for the immigrant workers. The poem transforms from mourning into praise since it conveys praise for those lives, the many hours they contributed towards working, and their dedication, but ultimately, the poem is a means to hold on to the memories of lives that were lost that day. (Espada, M., 2003)

In his poem, Espada signifies the importance of life by stating that each *life lost that day* is equally as valuable as a soldier or fireman who dedicates their life against terrorism. The importance implied in his style of free verse by mentioning,

“Praise the cook with a shaven head and a tattoo on his shoulder that said Oye, a blue-eyed Puerto Rican with people from Fajardo, the harbor of pirates centuries ago.”

Martin Espada, *Alabanza* p. 433

The form of free verse in this quotation directs the reader towards developing an understanding of one of the several critical points of consideration. The poem in its classical nature, seeks out the synergy between the use of rhythm and rhyme. However, on a closer analysis of Espada’s poem, it exhibits a different purpose by elaborating the concept of tragedy, which has impacted every American life, ranging from the lower economic families to the upper-class privileged families. In a further explanation provided in the stanzas, the poem illustrates the life of every person in America, associating with the depiction through a free narrative. This collaboration permits the reader to inspect different aspects of an ordinary working day for people, without considering their end drawing closer as the hours tick away. (Poetry Foundation, 2018)

"Praise the kitchen in the morning, where the gas burned blue on every stove."

Martin Espada, Alabanza p.433

Through his stanza, Espada relates to the misery that befell the American people that day, the horror the families of the victims went through, and, more so, the fear that struck the hearts of those laborers working their shift that day. Espada is scared by this grief over the lives that were swept away to their demise. This is especially so horrifying for the author that he notes it down in the stanza, in the expression, "The thunder wilder than thunder."

Martin Espada, Alabanza p. 434

As if struck by lightning, these simple yet complicated lives of people working that day ceased to exist. The author is so horrified over the brutality of the situation, the fear so gripping that he, too, cannot express it in any easier form. However, Espada's concern, from his poem, can be deduced from his attention towards the immigrants and the ways that are taken to dehumanize them, neglecting their needs and avoiding any debate regarding the recognition of their rights in society. At the very end, Espada leaves the reader with a message, pleading to their humanity and attempting to locate a general sense of solidarity in it. The method of employing the use of telling the reader rather than preaching to them is significantly more accommodating than what most poets implement in their poetry. Alabanza is noted to be quite unique in its style since it is not based on a system of continuous rants laid out one on top of another. Rather, Espada transfers his message through his words, making them easily understandable, relatable, and realistic. Being concerned for the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy, which would directly impact the lives of many immigrants, is affected by hate and aggressiveness. Even though most of the individuals working in the kitchens of the World Restaurant were undocumented individuals who lost their lives that very day, along with so many others, their misery remains unheard of, even now. Imposing the question on the reader, along with a plea, Espada attempts to evoke an emotional response within the hearts of many through his words. Entwined with words of art, carrying a purpose in them, Martin Espada hopes to reawaken human potential not only to provide an interesting approach towards the topic but to motivate every single person to take an initiative towards it as well. Alabanza carries in it both private and personal forms of histories for the public, eliciting a meaning out of the tragedy and highlighting the impact it has on human lives. Although from a close analysis of Espada's poem, his words often tend to come off as harsh, dark, and tragic, the selection of the word "Alabanza" is specifically chosen to represent smaller forms of victories through various acts of defiance, which most of the protagonists are remembered for. The compassion towards the world draws out people's actual association towards praising the stories and lives of many, which are finally surfacing.

Conclusion

The structure of the Alabanza is divided into numerous portions, each representing a unique perspective by being deliberately irregular. Each stanza is analyzed to initiate a new rhythm, directing the reader towards a new direction. The selection of the word “Alabanza” as the title actually translates to “praise” in Spanish. The poem transforms from mourning into praise since it conveys praise for those lives, the many hours they contributed towards working, and their dedication. The poet signifies the importance of life by stating that each life lost that day is equally as valuable as a soldier or fireman who dedicates their lives against terrorism. The poem, in its classical nature, seeks out the synergy between the use of rhythm and rhyme.

Espada relates to the misery that befell the American people that day, the horror the families of the victims went through, and, more so, the fear that struck the hearts of those laborers working their shift that day. Espada is scared by this grief over the lives that were swept away to their demise. The poet elicits a meaning out of the tragedy and highlights its impact on human lives. However, from a close analysis of Espada’s poem, his words often tend to come off as harsh, dark, and tragic. The method of employing the use of telling the reader rather than preaching to them is significantly more accommodating than what most poets implement in their poetry. (National September 11 Memorial & Museum, n.d.)

References

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