Sarah Nelson

Villaseñor

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Reading Analysis Essay

The story *The Bullet Swallower* recorded by Jovita González de Mireles is about a man who puts on a tough front to assuage his machismo pride. At the same time, he is compassionate for his fellow man and seems to value men more than women. The act of a woman recording and telling the story of Antonio Traga-Balas, the Bullet-Swallower, both challenges and defies the gender norms, especially the norms and stereotypes of the day, the nineteen hundreds.

To begin, the character of the Bullet-Swallower is first seen boasting about his physical prowess and bravery. He is the very image of a tough guy with scars, mutilations, and a long, wicked looking knife. Not only is he viewed as strong and manly through his image, he also reinforces that view by boasting about his brave exploits in battle. He never paints himself as a hero but as a manly man who is not afraid of anything. He is even heard saying that if he received a grave wound, he would “[tighten] [his] sash and continued the fray” (de Mireles, 525). Through all this evidence, it can be easy to write Traga-Balas as a typical man who lives for the fight and is comfortable living outside the law. Indeed, he is even described as a “smuggler and gambler by choice” (de Mireles, 525). Through this opening section, we can infer that Traga-Balas values violence and money a great deal and views anyone who shows fear in dangerous situations as lesser. This view in further enforced when he tells the story of how he got his nickname the Bullet-Swallower. As he was smuggling goods across a river, he and his crew were attacked by Texas Rangers. Instead of doing the smart thing and waiting until he was armed to provoke his enemy, Antonio Traga-Balas started insulting the Texas Rangers (de Mireles, 526). This further reinforces the violent stereotype. He is the very image of an angry, hot-blooded machismo man.

However, this image gets somewhat distorted as de Mireles continues the story. He gets called to a complete stranger’s house and then goes out of his way to provide this dying stranger with a priest to marry the dying man and the man’s girlfriend (de Mireles, 527). Although this act shows a more compassionate side to Traga-Balas, his treatment and view on the woman in the story paints a clear picture of Traga-Balas’s values. Before the marriage and throughout the marriage itself, the woman is seen drinking heavily to gather “courage…for the ordeal ahead of her” (de Mireles, 528). Although the woman is not seen to be given much choice in her marriage and might not even want the marriage in the first place, Traga-Balas does not seem to consider that and just views the woman with contempt. He does not try to understand her point of view or get to know her in any way. However, Traga-Balas not only goes out of his way to marry the dying man, he also comes to view the man, even after death, as a friend of sorts and ensures that he does not die alone. After the man is dead, Traga-Balas makes funeral arrangements and asks around for someone to help him a hold a vigil (de Mireles, 528-529). This level of compassion shows the reader that Traga-Balas places more value on men, even dead ones, than on women. He comes to view a man he knew for a very short amount of time as a friend and views the woman as some sort of drunken creature (de Mireles, 528-529). This compassion and friendship is seen again when, after being frightened away by the burning corpse, he returns to the corpse with the priest to finish the vigil (de Mireles, 529-530). This is the most love given by Traga-Balas in the whole story.

Through the act of collecting this piece of folklore and telling it to others, Jovita González de Mireles is both challenging and reinforcing the gender norms of the times. In the nineteen hundreds, gender norms were a lot stricter. A woman’s place was in the home taking care of children, cleaning, cooking, and caring for the house. Women were supposed to be delicate and sheltered from violence. Therefore, the very act of speaking of violence and recording it breaks the stereotype that women are not allowed to get involved in such things. However, women were expected to be involved in the care of children which includes storytelling and keeping traditions alive. In this way, de Mireles is complying with the gender norms of the time.

Throughout the story of *The Bullet Swallower*, recorded by Jovita González de Mireles, the character of Antonio Traga-Balas grows and the reader is able to see and understand his views towards his fellow man, women, and the nature of courage and fear. The recorder of this story both challenges and follows gender norms in the act of collecting this story.