

False Memory: Silence's Work in "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World"

By Meghan Parker

Death brings a silence that cannot be broken. No word or sound can bring people back to life, no matter what they left behind. Their books may still be read and their artwork still admired, but the deceased are forever silenced and only the memory of them remains. Those still living sometimes take extreme measures to preserve this memory, such as painting portraits, building monuments, and engraving tombstones. By remembering the dead, people prevent them from falling into the abyss of obscurity that comes with the "ultimate" death: being forgotten. The fear of this permanent silence ensures that the dead never truly die. In Gabriel García Márquez's short story "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World: *A Tale for Children*," the people in a small village on the coast bury a drowned man from a foreign land who washes ashore. As the stranger cannot tell his story, the villagers fill the silence with an imaginary tale of the man. By filling the void left in the drowned man's life, a void in the village is also filled that brings them closer to each other, and although appearing ridiculous and exaggerated, the story serves as a reflection of the natural human response to death.

A figure appears on the shore, mud encrusting his entire body, seaweed streaming off like hair flowing in the wind. The children see it as a harmless toy to be buried and unburied in the sand like a game, but the adults promptly snatch the body from the children and bring him inside. The women clean off the body; the men search for his home. Curiosity gets the better of the village and they begin filling in the story of the drowned man's life according to their imagination. Esteban, as he becomes known, slowly becomes a part of the town, and for his funeral they even designate familial relationships: mother, father, siblings of Esteban, even though the villagers themselves weren't even related. Per custom, the townspeople send Esteban

off the cliff into the sea, but he remains anchorless, allowing him to explore the sea as he pleases. In a moment of silence, the town people realize that they will never be complete anymore with the loss of Esteban. To fill that emptiness, the town plants flowers, expands houses, and hopes that everyone who sails past will *know* the village is Esteban's so he will always be remembered.

In death, the drowned man cannot tell the town who he is, where he is from, or how he ended up on their coast. During life, humans have the ability to talk and fill the silence, but in death there is no possibility to do this. Silence is an intrinsic part of life, even human life that is filled with constant noise and language, but it is especially present in death. Humans contain silence, and as Max Picard says in his essay on the function of silence and language, "The silence in a man stretches out beyond the single human life" (21). Forever, the drowned man will be silent. The tendency of people is to fill silence with noises to avoid all that silence holds. The silence that extends beyond a human life reminds people that they are temporary and merely a speck in time, contributing to their fear of silence in death. Memorials and funerals are an attempt to remember the departed and prevent their memory from fading.

Cemeteries are places of remembrance, filled with names carved into headstones, eternalizing the person buried underneath the ground. A name is significant to identity and generally people seem to "fit" their name. Picard says, "Silence is like a remembrance of that word. The different languages are like different attempts to find the absolute word" (43). A name is the "absolute" identity of a person in society; it is how they are recognized. As the women are cleaning the drowned man off, many of them come to the belief that his name is Esteban. There are some who question this, but during the night once the sea quiets down, "The silence put an end to any last doubts: he was Esteban" (Márquez 250). The name Esteban is the town's attempt to find this identity of the drowned man, even if it wasn't really this stranger's life. It's ironic

that his name is stated as a fact because none of this is actually known to them, but like Chief Bromden says in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, "it's the truth even if it didn't happen" (Kesey 8). Despite the fact that the name and all the stories are simply from the imagination of the villagers, to them it becomes their reality. To them, the man *is* Esteban and he is one of them now because he has not been claimed by anyone else.

It is strange that the town came to this consensus about the name so quickly to the point of appearing completely unrealistic. It's worth considering that the entire story is told in hyperbole, even the title "*The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World*" is an example of this overuse of the superlative form. Everything described about Esteban and the town's actions towards him are taken to the extreme. To keep his memory alive, the townspeople vow to transform their village by planting flowers and building bigger doorways so that one day sailors will say, "[...] over there, where the sun's so bright that the sunflowers don't know which way to turn, yes, over there, that's Esteban's village" (Marquez 254). All of these stories and hypothetical experiences of "Esteban" are created in the imagination of the town, and just as the imagination of children create fantastical scenarios, so does the imagination of the townspeople.

Filling the silence of Esteban with their grand stories and ideas of who he was brings the town into a communion and unity that was lacking before the arrival of the body. The town agrees on the name, they admire the man's body and face, and during the funeral, they are brought even closer to one another. Esteban filled a place in their community that they didn't even know existed, and after the funeral the villagers "did not need to look at one another to realize that they were no longer all present, that they would never be. But they also knew that everything would be different from then on" (Marquez 253). The village becomes one entity united by the drowned man, and they begin to understand each other without even speaking. The

silence that follows the funeral is a time where the villagers all realize what has happened and how Esteban affected all of them. Even though the villagers spend their time filling Esteban's silence, their own unspoken communication proves that "silence remains inescapably one form of speech and an element in every dialogue" (Glenn 5). The village didn't need words to know that they had all been changed, and in fact that silent moment was more powerful than if it was filled with language.

None of the perceptions of the town are realistic, but it is their reality and therefore is believable to them. The village is on a precarious cliff, isolated from the world, and constantly under the threat of the sea and the powerful winds. Life is far from happy in this town, and the treatment and fantasies of Esteban seem to allow the town to escape. Naturally, they fear the silence of Esteban, which they see as a projection for their village: lifeless and forgotten. The village fills the void that the drowned man has fallen into and in turn fills the void of their dull town. They honor the drowned man by creating an identity that they believe to be the truth but is ultimately fantasy. The village's reaction to the appearance of the drowned man is blown out of proportion. The town attempts to honor the memory of this dead man but they really only honor the perception of him that they create.

Although it sounds ridiculous, doesn't society already do this? People are always seen differently after they die; celebrities are glorified more, bad people are remembered for the few good deeds they did. What the town did isn't so uncommon for humans. Death creates an illusion of the person, a glowing and distorted version of the past and present. The living create this illusion in their attempt to keep the memory of the deceased alive, even if they are larger than life, false memories. Yet the hidden purpose of these fantasies is not for the living to remember the dead, it is for the living to find comfort in their loss. They convince themselves that the

memory of the life lived will conquer the death that ended it, reassuring themselves of the importance of their lives.

Works Cited

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