

The struggles of war
and the endurance of
the human spirit: the
cellist of saraje...



War has always been one of the most shocking and destructive staples of human history. In his novel *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, Canadian author Steven Galloway seeks to encapsulate the effects that war has on individuals.

Galloway emphasizes that although war has a significant impact on people, it is the positive outlook of citizens that enables them to grow in times of great sorrow. The author displays such a view of humanity through the symbolic use of music, the broken glass imagery, and the wildflowers. Ultimately, Galloway highlights the positive potential of the human spirit, even in times of struggle and strife.

The importance of the Cellist to the moral of the story cannot be overstated. The Cellist is an individual who endeavours, in the face of great danger, to play his instrument for twenty-two days consecutively. As the author makes clear, this is done in commemoration of the twenty-two victims who died as a result of a mortar strike on a crowded bakery in the besieged city of Sarajevo.

In Galloway's composition, the narrator takes the role of Kenan, a character who's daily routine consists of gathering water for his family. Kenan is a great admirer of music and states that " He has been to hear the Cellist play every day since the shelling at the brewery. Each day at four o'clock he stands in the street with his back pressed against a wall and watches as the city is reassembled and its people awaken from hibernation" (Galloway 2008). Even to the sight of the shelled brewery, the music that the Cellist plays before Kenan offers him escape. It brings him to an epic sense of realization that while war is a challenge and a struggle for all the individuals of society, there is still room for great beauty even in times when all hope

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might seem lost. It is the healing music given to Kenan that enables him to gain a positive outlook on life. The song that the Cellist plays, entitled Albinoni's Adagio, is significant in its own. The piece was discovered during the height of World War II, in a burned out church in Dresden, Germany (Galloway 2016); a city historically known for experiencing one of the worst fire bombings of the war (Alan 2016). It is stated in the prologue, " That something could be almost erased from existence in the landscape of a ruined city, and then rebuilt until it is new and worthwhile" (Galloway 2016). The song that the Cellist plays not only represents the healing effects of music, but also the hope of returning to their once great city that enables for people to grow at a time of great sorrow.

Broken glass is littered around the city of Sarajevo, wrenched apart by the mortar strikes and numerous sniper bullets. This is emphasized in the passage where the narrator highlights, that even as all the windows in Sarajevo are being reduced to shattered bits, citizens such as the ace sniper, aptly nicknamed Arrow, still keep the remains as souvenirs. (Galloway 2016). It is important to note that the author is not merely representing the daily struggles of the people of the city, but also the hope which is cast through the surviving pieces of shattered pane. It is the surviving elements of glass that allow a way forward for those who are surrounded, a hope and courage that allows for them to be optimistic about their lives and futures. Even in at a time when many of these pieces of glass might be shattered - it is the remaining ones that they hold on to that gives them hope.

In addition to glass, wild flowers also play a key role in the text. Throughout the story, the beleaguered citizens of Sarajevo habitually lay daisies before
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the Cellist as a sign of solidarity to his cause. However, on a deeper level, these flowers play a much larger symbolic role. As emphasized in the commentary review, provided in SuperSummary: The Cellist of Sarajevo, “The flowers are gifts for the Cellist and symbolize the color and life that his music represents and which has renewed their hope in life and the world. They begin to believe that the city can be rebuilt again—that a garden can grow again, that there will be flowers to grow again. Against the gray landscape that Galloway has created in this novel, flowers represent a sudden burst of color and a burst of hope as well” (SuperSummary 2016). This sentiment is echoed in the story when the narrator states, “On the street, the girls are moving. They step out of the line of fire and lay a small bouquet of wildflowers in front of the Cellist” (Galloway 2016). The citizens are willing to risk everything, even their lives, for the belief that hope can exist, a brighter future for tomorrow.

Hope is the most human element of people; even in times of war, it is the only thing that can bring individuals together. Throughout *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, hope is a recurring theme. Indeed, the entire novel on the whole, is an account of how the human spirit can conquer over circumstances of desperation and extreme grief. Through the accounts of the Cellist’s music, the imagery of the broken glass, and the emphasis on wildflowers, Galloway makes clear that even when all seems lost, beauty and salvation can still be found in the simplest of experiences.