

# A shot in the dark: the allegory of respect in "bullet in the brain"



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Tobias Wolff's "Bullet in the Brain," tells the story of a disrespectful literary critic who gets shot in the head by a recounts one last memory before his gruesome death. Wolff's story probes readers to not only challenge but contemplate their thoughts regarding life's ability to change in one instance, one act. Various readers and literary examinations interpret Anders's challenging character in different aspects. Although "Bullet in the Brain" typically perpetuates readings of biology or demonstrations of reprobation, this text actually redefines these readings and reveals, through the incorporation of characterization, tone with rhetor, and flashbacks, that this story is actually developed as an allegory catered towards disrespectful misogynist male audiences.

The significant presence of characterization in the story helps the target reader to first learn and understand Anders's character to then learn from it. In the first paragraph, readers develop a somewhat-wary perception of the main character as the story builds its exigence by claiming "He was never in the best tempers anyway, Anders – a book critic known for the weary elegant savagery with which he dispatched almost everything he reviewed." (Wolff 82). When the target male reader reads and contemplates this sentence, their mind forms assumptions that Anders is going to be a harsh, critical person who has the ability to find himself in trouble if he is not careful. Anders's critical nature is reinforced, yet again, to audiences when the narrator states, "He did not remember the pleasure of giving respect," and, "[Anders] had no choice but to scrutinize the painter's work. It was worse than he remembered" (Wolff 82). These parts of the text unravel the savagery inside Anders's head to characterize him as a mean man. While

other readers might disregard the importance of this part of the story, the target audience sees this section of the story as a setup for what is to come later on in the progression of the story's events. What also makes the beginning of "Bullet in the Brain" so significant is the fact that Anders, even when held at gunpoint, cannot restrict his harsh thoughts to protect his life that is the hands of agitated gun-wielding robbers. This action demonstrates, to misogynist audiences, that Anders is stubborn. While sexist male readers may find humor in the main character saying and doing whatever he wants. The reader develops a dislike for Anders's disrespectful manner because they realize something bad is going to happen if he keeps being disrespectful. Men relate to Anders's personality because they have experienced times in their life where they wish they could speak their mind. Textually speaking, men can create much meaning of the text and its lessons about the lack of respect because they have all witnessed another person be disrespectful. Yet, right after Anders's gunshot to the head, his internal thoughts are revealed and contextualized for men to interpret and realize that his death serves as a lesson to others to be respectful.

With the help of rhetor, the tone of the story makes several shifts which take the reader along for a ride of different empathetic emotions to understand the story's allegoric connotation. Some audiences might think the rhetor's role is not essential to the story's lessons, but male misogynists appreciate that the rhetor is the entity responsible for creating the thoughts, feelings, and emotions the story progresses line-by-line. As the story's exposition develops further and further, men expect this story to possibly be one-dimensional based solely on the first paragraph that depicts Anders, "stuck

behind two women whose loud, stupid conversation put him in a murderous temper” (Wolff 82). At first, the story feels somewhat normal since one of the first images displayed is loud obnoxious women in a bank. Little do audiences know, the somewhat misogynistic tone of the story then shifts into a dangerous one. The tone and mood of the story change drastically once, “silence came over the bank,” to reveal two masked men with pistols in their hands (Wolff 82). Suddenly the act of reading about a potential heist catalyzes the reader’s concerns about Anders’s safety because they feel Anders might not be a compliant hostage. Once Anders is shot in the head for being disrespectful to the robbers, target readers indicate the climax of the story just occurred. This pivotal moment in “Bullet in the Brain” acts as one of the final tone transitions of the story. As this dangerous (and fearful) tone fades from the lines, target male readers form an empathetic tone as the story uncovers background of Anders’s troubled life. Misogynists notice that the text is manipulating them into creating empathy for a character that remembers his first real love, forgets the “hundreds of poems” once committed to memory, or recalls his dead mother’s wishes of wanting to kill his father (Wolffe 83). The rhetor’s reveal of this emotional passage serves as a form of actively discovering the notion that complex characters experienced complex events. Male misogynists understand the headshot is the symbol (and dramatized consequence) of continued disrespect. The target audience realizes the gunshot is Anders’s punishment for being disrespectful in the moment, and all these years. Misogynist men are immediately prompted by the rhetor to feel sympathy for Anders’s bloodied body on the cold marble bank floor because they see part of themselves in

him. The target audience's response to this part of the text is what ultimately gives the story allegoric meaning.

At the very end of the story, the audience discovers, through the way of a flashback, that Anders's critical, misogynistic nature stemmed from his fascination of hearing southern dialect from a boy on his baseball team when he was younger. Some audiences might believe flashbacks are not essential to the events transpiring in the text because the past does not predict the future. However, this flashback serves as the final piece to the puzzle of figuring out Anders and why he is the way he is. This flashback (along with the other flashbacks mentioned previously) makes the male misogynist audience to form of understanding and feel empathy for Anders's character. Anders used to be respectful as a child when the audience reads his flashback where Anders believes, "others will think [of himself as] being a jerk, ragging the kid for his grammar" (Wolff 83). In the present day, decades later, Anders's is now the type person who cannot remember, "the pleasure of giving respect," to people (Wolff 83). Seeing Anders, even if for a brief glimpse, in this image challenges the reader's original perspective of him. Knowing that Anders was once a nice person, makes the reader wonder what happened to him that made him the way he is now. Anders's one-dimensional character fades away, thus establishing him as a dynamic character. Male misogynists interpret this section of the story and put into perspective all the good and back in their life. The flashback serves as not only an emotional persuasive (pathos) technique but an exemplary tale of remembering to never lose sight of respect. For Anders, he was a victim of

his actions, but his flashback acts as a cautionary sign for critical men that it is never too late to be a good person.

Anders was once a cautious and caring person, but being a critic for so long turned him into a negative person he could not break, and it is this realization that makes misogynist readers realize that they should not follow the ways of Anders because they do not want to end up like him - alone and dead. Anders's death (and the events leading up to his death) ultimately serve as an (extreme) allegory to target audiences that respect is an essential human quality to possess, especially in life-or-death situations. Some audiences may believe this story is not important and has no real meaning, but the text's true audience can refute this. The literary tools implemented in this story force the misogynist male readers to reject their damaging tendencies. "Bullet in the Brain" is an important story that invades the mind and persuades allegoric thoughts onto the brain with the same intention and impact of a fired bullet.