

Survival of the
broken: analyzing
"my faithful mother's
tongue" and
"leningrad"



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ The problem with surviving was that you ended up with the ghosts of everyone you’d ever left behind riding on your shoulders.” – Paolo Bacigalupi

Czeslaw Milosz and Osip Mandelstam are two poets who have survived many tragedies during their lives. They both lived extremely difficult lives due to the situations in their homelands. Osip Mandelstam was a Russian poet who lived in Russia throughout its revolution. Czeslaw Milosz was a Polish poet who lived through times when fascism (World War II and Stalinism) was prominent at his home in Europe. In the two works, “ My Faithful Mother’s Tongue” by Czeslaw Milosz and “ Leningrad” by Osip Mandelstam, a sense of survivor’s guilt is expressed through the diction and the tone of each poem.

Survivor’s guilt is a serious problem affecting the lives of many after the various atrocities that have occurred in history and that will in the future. For example, many veterans suffer from PTSD, (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). This occurs after one experiences traumatic events, such as experiencing first hand war, seeing lives being taken, and taking lives themselves. Additionally, this guilt can be found within refugees who are forced to leave their homeland. There are many reasons for people to find refuge, may it be because of political issues or catastrophic events, it has become an unfortunately popular practice. The successful refugees may seem to be saved from the tragedies in their homeland but there is sometimes a powerful hidden consequence. Many Refugees carry unseen burdens on their shoulders: their destroyed homes, families, and neighbors. These authors are a prime representation of the tragedies that follow conflicted countries that force its constituents to a point of exile.

Milosz demonstrates how survivor's guilt is a very destructive force. He expresses a sense of loss that can only be seen in many aspects of a broken culture. In the beginning of "My Faithful Mother Tongue," the speaker says, "Every Night, I used to set before you little bowls of colors so you could have your birch, your cricket, your finch as preserved in my memory." The speaker conveys his commitment to his dying language, and his efforts to nurture it back into his memory. Furthermore, in the middle of the poem, the speaker states something very profound, a metaphor that resonates with the reader, "Fortune spreads a red carpet before the sinner in a morality play." This is a great example of how survivors of disasters face the possibility of living the rest of their lives in shame and guilt as the notion of having done something wrong haunts them. Milosz then concludes the poem with the line, "For what is needed in misfortune is a little order and beauty," This elaborates on Milosz's idea that the misfortuneds (in Milosz's case the victims of fascism and Stalinism) deserve to be honored and glorified because they demonstrate the chaos and the harsh reality of life for others. Milosz also says that, "perhaps after all it's I who must try to save you." This further promotes the idea of sharing responsibility for and remembering the unfortunate.

Additionally, Milosz feels obligated to redeem the loss of language and order his country experienced. Throughout the poem one can pick up the tone of grief and shame that carries with his words and his emphasis on responsibility to remember the ill fated members of his home. Through diction and tone Milosz preaches his importance of recognition for the losses his country encountered and the responsibility he feels the survivors

of the world must apprehend. In addition to Milosz, Mandelstam expresses his experience of survival guilt through his physical experiences upon returning to his home. He introduces the reader with the line, " I've come back to my city. These are my old tears.... childhood." The way he says " my city" is the indication of the connection he had with his home and his sense of ownership and pride for his country. Furthermore, he says, " These are my own old tears, my own little veins, the swollen glands of my childhood." This statement alludes to Mandelstam's memories of his childhood and growing up in his home, which further signified his strong relationship he had with his country to the readers. Later in the poem the speaker says, " Petersburg! I've still got the addresses: I can look up dead voices." Mandelstam implies the amount of suffering and loss his town had experienced, and how he remembers the addresses and names of the people he used to know who are now gone.

Mandelstam also illustrates how recurring his grief is when he says, " I live on the dark stairs, and inside my head sounds a bell torn out from the flesh of the dead. This describes how his guilt is constantly triggered by the remains of his old home, and how loud and profound that guilt actually is. The entirety of this poem carries the tone of discontent, pain, and grief; the loss of his town that has since changed its name upon his return. The speaker ends the poem with, " And I wait till morning for guests that I love, and rattle the door in its chains." Once again, this has a connotation similar to how Milosz ended his poem. This idea of rattling the door in its chains brings up the point of how Mandelstam feels the same sense of responsibility to put a spotlight on the unethical and political issues their hometowns

experienced. Mandelstam wants to share that this can be very destructive. The diction and tone that Mandelstam's poem possesses, exemplifies how it is hard to escape the tragedies and destruction of a place, especially when that place was one's home, because of the impending guilt that follows.

Survivor's guilt is a very serious self conflict in the lives of the many refugees and immigrants, throughout the world and throughout history, who have witnessed historical atrocities. The two authors show this through their poetry and their attempts in sharing the tragedies and immoralities involving broken countries. In the two poems, Milosz and Mandelstam convey the notion of survivor's guilt and the levels of severe shame and regret that one might experience.