

# The bystander effect



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“ And of Clay We Are Created,” written by Isabel Allende, explores what social psychologists refer to as the bystander effect. In the story, Azucena is a little girl who is trapped in the mud, and needs help if she is to survive. While the girl suffers and was filmed by countless reporters, no one actually comes to save her. The reporters are more concerned with filming the girl than with saving her life. “ The bystander effect is a psychological phenomenon where persons are less likely to lend assistance in an emergency situation when other humans are present than when they are alone” (Myers, 463). Throughout the story, Allende uses voyeurism as a critical dramatic device as she connects Eva Luna to Rolf and Azucena. Through the interactions between the characters, Allende is able to investigate how voyeurism can lead to social apathy and act as a desensitizer in a crisis.

Allende’s “ And of Clay We Are Created” describes how a host of reporters and cameramen become desensitized and apathetic towards Azucena as she is dying a preventable death. The situation clearly characterizes the bystander effect. Studies by John Darley, a social psychologist at Princeton University, Allan I. Teger, and Lawrence D. Lewis, his colleagues, demonstrated this psychological phenomenon in the laboratory. The most common explanation of this phenomenon is that, the more people present, the more likely the individual observer will pass off the responsibility to help the victim, unfortunately believing that there is bound to be someone who is helping already or is going to help soon (Darley, Lewis, and Teger 395). As more reporters arrive on the scene, each individual reporter feels less obliged to actually, help the girl. Although in the story Allende does mention,

“ Soldiers and volunteers had arrived to rescue the living,” the reader is made aware that much of the rescue effort is ineffective and cumbersome (47).

In this way, Allende poignantly criticizes the government for not responding appropriately, when she points out “ geologists had set up their seismographs weeks before and knew that the mountain had awakened again” (47). She goes on to say that the geologists had “ predicted that the heat of the eruption could detach the eternal ice from the slopes of the volcano, but no one heeded their warnings” (Allende 47). The immediate thought that strikes the reader is that this completely ghastly episode could have been thwarted entirely if only the villagers had been either directly forewarned or even forced to relocate by the authorities. Interestingly, Allende seems to point out that the villagers themselves did not heed the warnings of the geologists, perhaps to mitigate any blame on the government and the media.

Adding to the frustration and ignorance, the leaders of the government and military are unable and/or unwilling to help secure a pump that could have drained the mud water, which could have effectively saved the little girl’s life. Although it is granted that Azucena is not the only person in dire need of rescuing, the fact that she “ became the symbol of the tragedy” (47) while never receiving help is truly heartbreaking. Instead, the entire world must watch the girl die a slow, agonizing death in front of the cameras. What makes the situation so horrifying is that this event closely parallels an actual incident that occurred in Columbia in 1985 (“ Picture power”). A volcano had erupted (as in the story), and vomited debris and catalyzed mudslides that

engulfed the towns near the mountain. A photojournalist who proceeded to take her photograph, which made headlines throughout the world, found a 13-year-old girl. Many who saw the photographs were appalled how “ technology had been able to capture her image for all time and transmit it around the globe, but was unable to save her life” (Picture power”). In fact, Allende seems to explicitly question the integrity and value of human technology as she describes how “ more television and movie teams arrived with spools of cable, tapes, film, videos, precision lenses, recorders, sounds consoles, lights, reflecting screens, auxiliary motors, cartons of supplies, electricians, sound technicians, and cameramen,” yet how they were not able to secure one life-saving pump (50). It is almost unbelievable how so much advanced technology and machines are brought to film the disaster as opposed to the amount of materials and supplies that are needed to help save the victims of the calamity. Allende is almost begging someone to help the girl as Rolf keeps pleading for a pump (50).

Allende also masterfully foreshadows that the attempt to save Azucena’s life will inevitably fail as she tells how “ anyone attempting to reach her was in danger of sinking [themselves]” (48). When a rope is thrown to the girl, she tries to grab the rope, but ends up sinking deeper into the mud (Allende, 48). At this point, the reader must also ask whether Azucena actually wants to be saved. She must have been in the mud for some time now, and the pain and shock would have been eating away at her will to survive. In fact, when the rope is thrown at her, she makes no effort to catch the rope (Allende, 48). Has Allende doomed Azucena to death already? For a while, the reader is given little rays of hope that the girl will eventually be rescued and that

there will be a happy ending, but in all honesty, most of the signs point toward certain death for the girl. Another attempt to rescue her by tying a rope beneath her arms is also thwarted when the girl cries out in pain from them pulling on the rope (Allende, 48). She is stuck in the mud and is only kept from being totally consumed by the mud when she is given a tire as a life buoy (Allende, 48).

Allende skillfully blends fact and fiction, by creating her own stories from events that have transpired in the real world. She creates characters that tell a gripping story, and become very believable. In the story, Rolf is a reporter who finds Azucena, the girl trapped in the mud and debris. Samuel Amago, a literary critic writing in the Latin American Literary Review, asserts that “[Rolf] tries to give [Azucena] the inspiration to live while the impersonal television cameras look on without helping” (54). He has become battle-tested through his work as Allende explains: For years, he had been a familiar figure in newscasts, reporting live at the scene of battles and catastrophes with awesome tenacity. Nothing could stop him...it seemed as if nothing could shake his fortitude or deter his curiosity. Fear seemed never to touch him, although... he was not a courageous man, far from it. (47)

Through Azucena’s struggle, he ends up undergoing a personal transformation by abandoning his aloof stance as a reporter that had served him so well in previous episodes, and by passionately embracing the girl’s fate personally.

This is where voyeurism comes into play. This is not the kind of voyeurism confined only to the sexual fetish of receiving gratification from observing a

sexual occurrence or object, but as Elizabeth Gough, a literary critic writing in the *Journal of Modern Literature*, states that it also includes any kind of “intense, hidden or distant gazing” (93). Eva Luna is not physically present with Rolf and Azucena, but she is able to see everything that is occurring through the news. She is in a way, spying on the two people. The intensity of her gazing is noticeable as the reader finds that Eva is emotionally, connected as she witnesses the events on television.

The first aspect of voyeurism we find is the camera in the story. Rolf is a reporter and sees everything through a lens. Allende describes how “the lens of the camera had a strange effect on him; it was as if it transported him to a different time from which he could watch events without actually participating in them” (47-48). The mechanical tailoring of the cameras rolling as a human life is slowly failing portrays the media as impersonal, cold, and heartless. To Rolf, the camera lens acted like a desensitizer and promoted a sense of separation between Rolf and his surroundings so that while he was physically at the scene, his mind was in another safe, secure place. Eva Luna realizes that for Rolf, the “fictive distance [between the lens and the real world] seemed to protect him from his own emotions” (321). Rolf had erected a psychological self-defense mechanism in response to his traumatic experiences as a young child. His trauma mostly stems from his guilt for not protecting his sister, Katharina, from their abusive father. Allende suggests that Rolf could not forgive himself for not saving his sister, but through his efforts to save Azucena- and through his subsequent emotional revelations- he could finally “weep for her death and for the guilt of having abandoned her” (328). Through this act of acceptance, Rolf finally

realizes that all his life he had been “ taking refuge behind a lens to test whether reality was more tolerable from that perspective” (Allende 328). Allende suggests that Rolf’s voyeuristic approach to life had led to shallow success as a reporter, and weakened his ability to trust his own emotions as well as other humans. Why else did it take him so long to accept that Azucena was going to die? It was because he was too afraid to feel the pain of loss again, just like when he lost his sister.

One of the most memorable turning points in the story occurs when Azucena helps Rolf break down his emotional barriers and to come to terms with own past. Azucena accomplishes this not by saying much, but by listening to Rolf’s stories until he could not hold back the “ unyielding floodgates that had contained Rolf Carle’s past” (Allende, 327). In a classic reversal of roles, Azucena takes on the nurturing role of the adult during Rolf’s weak and vulnerable moments. Allende portrays Rolf’s mother as an uncaring, frigid woman who would not give him emotional support or even to dry his tears (329). Azucena is the one who tells Rolf not to cry, something a traditional mother figure would have done (Allende 329).

Voyeurism is also evident when Eva Luna, Rolf’s lover, watches all that occurs in the news on television. The physical distance between Eva and Rolf is palpable, as Allende explains through Eva: “ Many miles away, I watched Rolf Carle and the girl on a television screen” (324). Nonetheless, through the story we are made aware that Eva and Rolf are intangibly bound together. The reader is left in the similar plight of Eva; we see natural disasters and tragedy through the eyes of the media. Therefore, in a sense, the media helps desensitize humans to real tragedies that occur by providing

a fictive, safe distance for its viewers. This is precisely the reason why actually experiencing something can leave a truly lasting impression whereas seeing something on television can seem obscure and impartial.

However, in the story, this fictive distance actually fuels the reality of what is happening at the disaster scene to Eva. For Eva, it is as if she is physically present at the disaster with Rolf and Azucena. The images on the television help her visualize what Rolf is seeing and even thinking at each precise moment, “hour by hour” (Allende 326). It is indeed surprising and remarkable how Allende portrays the attachment of Eva to Rolf even though Eva is limited to the impersonal medium of television to ‘keep in touch’ with her lover. Allende explains that Eva was “near [Rolf’s] world and [she] could at least get a feeling of what he lived through” (324). She further clarifies that while “[t]he screen reduced the disaster to a single plane and accentuated the tremendous distance that separated [Eva] from Rolf Carle; nonetheless, [she] was there with him” (324). Eva and Rolf were connected in mind as well, as Eva was able to overhear the verbal exchanges between Rolf and Azucena to the point where she was present with them (Allende 326). Although it can be argued that Eva is much more personally connected and involved than the general reader is to the situation at the site of the catastrophe, the reader is drawn into the conflict and struggle by the personal narrative of Eva. The reader is told the story through Eva’s perspective, and thus we are left with an impression that is comparable to the storyteller. The voyeurism goes many ways.

Compounding this idea of long-distance interconnectedness is how Allende ties Eva to Azucena, in addition to Rolf. Through Rolf’s interplay with



Azucena, Eva is hurt by the girl's every suffering, and feels Rolf's frustration and impotence (Allende 324). The three are enjoined together in a peculiar love triangle. Rolf tells Azucena that he loves her " more than he loved his mother, more than his sister, more than all the women who had slept in his arms, more than he loved [Eva], his life companion" (Allende 330). Of course, he does not mean Eros love, the kind between adult men and women, but a more intrinsically human one of neighborly love and goodwill. Eva, in her turn, expresses her love for Rolf and Azucena when she admits that she " would have given anything to be trapped in that well in her place, [and] would have exchanged her life for Azucena's" (Allende 330). We are then forced to analyze whether the voyeuristic qualities of the media affects the different types of l

ove shown in the story. For the most part, the media helps Eva to express stronger love for Rolf and to become connected to Azucena, whom she had never met. Without the media, Eva would never have known what had happened at the disaster as well as the identity of the little girl who had tremendously affected Rolf. For Rolf, his initial voyeurism through the lens of the camera had acted as a desensitizer and emotional barricade, and when faced with the crisis, his love for Azucena is bolstered as he comes to realize he must let go of his past and obligingly accept the situation. However, Rolf's love for Eva seems to have taken a hit after he returns from his ordeal (Allende 331).

A bitter question one is forced to ask is what or who exactly Allende is blaming in her story, or if she is even blaming someone or something in particular for Azucena's death. While it is clear that Rolf definitely undergoes

a psychological metamorphosis, we cannot logically assume that this change is for the better. The end of the story suggests that Rolf will never be the “same man” again, but that he will eventually “heal” (Allende 331). Eva hopes that one day when Rolf “return[s] from [his] nightmares,” they shall be the happy couple they used to be (Allende 331). However, the ending suggests that for Rolf, the incident was as traumatic as his initial trauma as a child. Rolf is not free from his past, as Eva would like him to be. In fact, although he is freed from his childhood trauma, he is still haunted by his failure to save Azucena. Perhaps Allende is suggesting that emotional healing can only occur when the victim is ready to be healed.

Then is Allende blaming the media for Azucena’s death? Alternatively, is she pointing out the gross inability of the government to intervene swiftly and to protect its citizens? Probably, a bit of both. The media is clearly depicted in a heartless, cold manner. Why did anyone not help? Nevertheless, if any one thing is to be blamed, it should be the society where this incident occurred. Allende seems to be challenging the ineptitude and unpreparedness of the government and its leaders for not mustering the resources and courage to save the girl. The villagers are also criticized as unheeding fools who only brought the calamity upon themselves by not listening to the geologists. This makes it hard to blame anyone at all. Perhaps Allende is suggesting that it is unnecessary to blame anyone, but rather to calmly accept what happened, just as Azucena does in the end. One thing is though: that Allende does not approve of the social apathy that permeates throughout the story, and claims that it was the unwillingness to help that ultimately kills Azucena. This

makes us wonder, just how dangerous it can be to remain a bystander, instead of actively assisting those who need our help.

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