

## When Butterflies Die: Alvarez and Her Idea of Death

As opposed to the European tradition to mourn over the people who are leaving this world, Alvarez claims that death is not merely rotting in a coffin. This allows her to expand the idea of death and grasp the notions which relate to mourning. The pain of loss may turn out to be even more affecting than a painful sensation caused by a wound; it is able to move physical suffering to the background, Alvarez says. Contrasting the blood spilt during the notorious revolution, she contrasts the wounds of the fight on the battlefield with the wounds within people's souls. The latter prove to be the most painful and dangerous, Alvarez warns. However, she also claims that this is the pain which can be stifled: "I don't know how it happened that my cross became bearable" (Alvarez 200). Since people saw the purport of their unceasing battle, their hearts could not help aching for their families and their country. Feeling the fire burning inside them, people managed to keep their struggle; otherwise, they would have ended up in a cowardly surrender long before.

The story emphasizes that despite pain causes people's physical or psychological suffering, it makes them one step closer to the victory. Making the readers feel the pain of the losses with every inch of their skin, Alvarez deliberately takes them through the hellfire of the characters' life and finally drives them to the obvious conclusion: pain motivates people to act. If the world did not know what a loss or death is, people would have never climbed so high:

And I see them all there in my memory, as still as statues, Mamá and Papá, and Minerva and Mate and Patria, and I'm thinking something is missing now. And I count them all twice before I realize – it's me, Dede, it's me, the one who survived to tell the story. (321)

Being one of the most touching moments from *In the Time of the Butterflies*, this passage makes one think over a range of significant questions. Counting the losses which the revolt brought to his life, Dede actually makes a summary of people's lives and deeds. With these simple and almost meaningless words, Dede destroys the effect of the revolt in a moment. Because of the memories which these things brought back to her, she feels no longer deprived of something vitally important.

It is doubtless that the losses in *In the Time of the Butterflies* create the chain which is supposed to drive the lead characters to some idea, a summary of what had happened to them. Unless they had suffered all the woes, they would have never understood what they should appreciate as the most important part of their lives. Considering the remark made by Alvarez herself, the novel was designed for people to travel through the make-believe and understand the true value of life and loss; perhaps, even to evaluate one's own life and see the misfortunes as a chance to improve something. As Dede said:

And it helps, I've found, if I can count them off, so to speak. And sometimes when I'm doing that, I think, maybe these aren't losses. Maybe that's the wrong way to think of them. The men, the children, me. We went our own ways, we became ourselves. Just that. And maybe that is what it means to be a free people, and I should be glad? (317)

Another idea which Alvarez conveys in the book is the cyclic nature of people's lives and events that happen in them. Sorrow about death, whether it expressed as grief of a sudden loss or the nagging anguish, will soon shift to another phase, which is calmness. Interchanging and intertwining, these feelings help people to acclimatize to the new environment and manage their lives the new way:

A chill goes through her, for she feels it in her bones, the future is now beginning. By the time it is over, it will be the past, and she doesn't want to be the only one left to tell their story. (10)

The future that appears before Dede scares her, and she feels the desire to escape from the weird atmosphere surrounding her. She anticipates that the changes cannot be avoided and that the certain moment of passing to another environment, “the little death”, will inevitably happen. Moreover, she feels that the sequence of “the little deaths” is the “fee” that children pay for growing up. Reaching another stage of progress, which is becoming adults, people have to lose something as a token of their “initiation”, according to Alvarez. Her impeccable conclusion summarizes the results of the struggle, making it clear that another loss is another step into the future. Thus, Alvarez considers these losses to be the way to achieve the desired liberty: the liberty of adults. The haunting atmosphere of death serves as a means of showing the recurrence of life. Switching from the tempest of a revolt to the calmness after the storm, Alvarez shows that whatever happens, life resumes its normal course thereafter.

Creating the tragic story of a make-believe world, Alvarez suggests her interpretation of what happened to the Dominican Republic in the distant past. In her understanding of historical facts, the losses born by people did not occur in vain, for they had brought the long-desired victory and liberty to the people. While there is nothing more precious in the world than freedom, death of some butterflies is merely a price for a better life. The author shows that no matter how much pain it “costs” to achieve the goals which have been set once, people have to strive for them, and the losses on their way are the size of droplets compared to the great goal. Since butterflies are the embodiment of beauty, they have to be sacrificed to be reborn in

the new wonderful world. Due to the cyclic nature of the world and the recurrence as the main feature of the universe, the ruined will be finally renewed; it is just necessary to take a step towards realizing the importance of the losses taken and their necessity. This is the lesson that must be learned.

Although butterflies suffer when dying, their death will mark another stage of their development. Death as passing, not cessation, is what Alvarez suggests. With this wisdom of the winners, people will be able to bear suffering and retain a positive look into the future.

## Works Cited

Alvarez, Julia. *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2010.