A Tradition and Legacy of Stories

In his lecture on ‘mythos-minded’ thinking, University of Washington professor David Bosworth made the claim that: “Even in this scientific age, we remain a storytelling species” (Bosworth, 1/31/19). Stories have always been an indispensable impulse for people to connect with each other and the world around them. The theme of stories and their resonance is a central aspect of Emma Adatto Schlesinger’s “La Tía Estambolía.”This miniature memoir captures in its few short pages how storytelling allows people to continue the traditions of their past, preserve culture for their future, and carry on the legacies of those who came before them. Author Schlesinger emphasizes these powers of stories to capture and preserve the people and customs of the Sephardic Jewish community, both in her portrayal of character La Tía Estambolía, and in the construction of her own personal history.

In this narrative, La Tía uses her stories to perpetuate the traditions of her past. Schlesinger describes La Tía’s stories here:

“The plots were most often of Greek, Turkish, or other origins, but all of the characters… were distinctly Jewish: Avrams and Rajels who observed the traditions of marriages, circumcisions, Sabbaths, kindness to strangers and the needy. The fascination was as much with their way of life as with the development of the plot” (Schlesinger 34).

This quote emphasizes the multiplicity of La Tía’s stories. Her plots tie back to the history of the Sephardic Jews, their displacement from Spain and subsequent resettlement across the Mediterranean. Her characters instruct on the Jewish tradition. Schlesinger portrays how stories have become La Tía’s tool and guidebook, her way of ensuring that the lessons of the past are not forgotten. La Tía stands apart, not only because of her status as an elder in her community, but because her skill at internalizing and recreating tales makes her inimitable, powerful. Another quote demonstrating La Tía’s proficiency is as follows: “Once I asked La Tía where she had learned these stories. According to her, everyone learned from hearing them in childhood. Not everyone remembered them because they weren’t as interested or had poor memories” (Schlesinger 35). Stories are used to instruct children from a young age, teach them where they come from and how they should behave.This quote portrays the significance of stories within culture. As bearer of these stories, La Tía is critical as a vessel of memory.

Storytelling also preserves culture for future generations – in this case, the culture of Sephardic Judaism. Schlesinger describes how La Tía’s stories are recorded – first written down verbatim by Schlesinger herself, then recorded on discs through the University of Washington alongside nine other Sephardic Jewish women – all with the hope of preserving these slices of history (Schlesinger 35). These actions demonstrate the value of stories: how entrenched they are in culture and meaning, and how important it is to preserve them. Schlesinger emphasizes the necessity of accurately recording these oral traditions. Her characters additionally express these views. Schlesinger uses dialogue to drive home her point:

“‘My my,’ said my mother… ‘Our grandchildren will never know how we lived. It will seem like fairy tales to them’…“‘Don’t say that, Anna,’ said La Tía. ‘Didn't you tell us that our customs will be preserved by scholars and put in books? Isn’t Amada doing all her work to keep these memories?’” (Schlesinger 36).

La Tía describes here the exact point that Schlesinger suggests: stories are a means of sculpting memories into materials, pressing moments between pages to later be perused. In telling and recording her stories, La Tía ensures that her fragments of Sephardic Jewish history would outlive her when she’s gone.

Storytelling acts as a means of carrying on legacy. By nature, a memoir is a narrative of memory, as the prefix suggests. In this narrative, La Tía’s stories are preserved, but so is La Tía herself. As Isabelle Donsbach cites in her essay on “La Tía Estambolia,” “Tía seems to be a story character in her own life, admired by all and described like a book character. Her soul is so intertwined with the stories she becomes one herself” (Donsbach 2-3). Donsbach here emphasizes how stories immortalize La Tía, which is done through physical and behavioral descriptions alike. At the story’s opening, Schlesinger gives a detailed description of La Tía’s appearance, which helps readers to both visualize and characterize her. The descriptions of her clothes give an impression of her upright, formal, detail-oriented nature. Her *toca* scarf and *tespil* rosary reference her Sephardic heritage. This description emphasizes the importance of this heritage to La Tía, to the extent that it influences her dress. Continuing through the narrative, Schlesinger’s descriptions of La Tía as a storyteller also help to characterize her. Not only do readers see how La Tía shapes stories, they also learn how these stories have shaped the narrator. First-person narration allows readers to see La Tía as Schlesinger sees her. La Tía comes alive within Schlesinger’s words, as shown in the story’s concluding quote: “As I reread La Tía’s tales, I had a most unusual experience. She had been tucked away in the cells of my memories, completely intact. She was as alive, as charming, as interesting as I had left her in 1938” (Schlesinger 36). Storytelling preserves people in amber. In documenting this narrative, La Tía lives on in the mind of readers and author alike. Schlesinger’s memory and experiences of La Tía live on as well.

Schlesinger practices what she preaches. The story that Schlesinger tells as a whole captures glimpses of the lives of Sephardic Jews in Seattle in the 1930s, just as La Tía’s stories do within the narrative. For instance, Schlesinger outlines customs surrounding food throughout the narrative, describing patterns of serving and how these relate to hierarchies within the community and home, as shown in this quote describing La Tía’s storytelling patterns:

“One could never ask her to tell a story. After the sweets, the coffee, and the small talk, the host would begin with such blessings upon her as may she have a long life, may she live to see all her nieces and nephews married, and may she see Jerusalem. Then she – always addressed in the third person, never in the second person – would be begged to tell a tale” (Schlesinger 34).

While still keeping her emphasis on La Tía and her storytelling, Schlesinger models effective incorporation of cultural practices into storytelling. The ritual mealtime and blessings she outlines represent routines and values of the Sephardic Jewish community. Schlesinger also demonstrates the power of words and language in stories. This narrative was originally written in Ladino, a language that is part of the Sephardic heritage and history Schlesinger recreates. Ladino words still litter the text, even in the English translation provided by the author, demonstrating how a story cannot be told without its language. Donsbach additionally elaborates here, stating how: “The use of italics allows the reader to differentiate between English and other languages, as well as drawing attention to them... Another use of these multiple languages is to refer to things for which there is no English equivalent” (Donsbach 1). This evidence expands on the importance of language and its uses within the narrative. Overall, Schlesinger uses her own narrative to illustrate her thematic stances about culture within stories.

Storytelling as a practice has endured for millennia. Telling stories is a human tradition adopted by nearly every culture in some form. Inversely, stories have also become a means by which to represent and recreate cultures of the past for people of the present. This is exactly what Emma Adatto Schlesinger accomplishes with regards to the Sephardic Jewish community within her narrative, “La Tía Estambolía.” In both the content and form of her memoir, Schlesinger demonstrates how stories have the power to recall and preserve the past, leaving legacies for the future.

Works Cited

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