

Take a moment of silence. Is silence simply judged by the external environment, or is there something deeper?

To explore what silence is, we might want to take a look at what opposes silence. There are a number of concepts that appear to contrast with silence – sound, which includes music and noise. The sense of hearing is vital to civilisation, and if silence is a state of not perceiving anything through the ear, then the above three should be responsible for breaking this silence. For humans, hearing and listening are key means of learning and knowing. Speech is a clear example of how we use sounds to communicate our thoughts. Music is another means of expression, where the audience is able to feel the emotions of the composer through harmony and dissonance, as well as different dynamics and tempo, without the necessity of words. Although noise does not usually convey a message, it gives us a sense of the environment that surrounds us, making us conscious of the world around us.

Human learning and communication has been heavily dependent on all types of sound. On the contrary, it seems like silence, being opposite to sound, is meaningless. Chances are, while taking a moment of silence, we are just hearing some faint noises. The emphasis put on sound in the modern world is strong. As Calvin Coolidge, the 30th President of the United States once said, it takes a great man to be a good listener. Having open ears is often seen as a virtue, because it allows us to grasp more of the world so that more is learned. Listening and hearing are channels through which we know. The process of knowing is very much dependent on what we hear, be it verbal expression, music or noise.

Silence, meanwhile, is often associated with loneliness or boredom. There are many examples in literature that show solitude, and it either gives the impression of silence to the reader, or uses silence to imply solitude. Either way, many books with a theme of isolation draw upon silence to express the characters' loneliness. Examples include Ms Havisham before she adopted Estella in Charles Dicken's *Great Expectations* and Julius Winsome as depicted by Gerard Donovan.

Although the focus seems to be on hearing and sound, there are some who think that we should listen to silence. In *The Chosen*, Chaim Potok wrote, 'I've begun to realise that you can listen to silence and learn from it. It has a quality and dimension all its own.'

Indeed, we seem to learn a lot from what we hear. However, this does not mean that we cannot get knowledge from silence. Some of the greatest philosophers urge us to withdraw to silence in order to see ourselves clearer. Many religions practice meditation, which is believed to bring man closer to seeing the truth. For example, Gregory Palamas, an Eastern Orthodox theologian, promoted what was called 'Hesychasm', from the Greek word for silence, which means to retreat to solitude and focus on inner feelings while blocking physical senses. It is believed that through this, the *theoria*, an understanding of God, can be acquired.

Of the many means of knowing, faith is just a tip of the iceberg. There are so many more ways silence can be a unique form of expression itself, much like sound. Could silence be music? John Cage's *4'33"* is one of his most iconic and out-of-the-box creations. No 'music' is actually played during the four minutes and thirty three seconds. Some people therefore doubt whether it

can be considered music. Nonetheless, it is a way of allowing the audience to ‘hear’ silence. According to Cage, who once walked into a very much sound-proof room, there is actually some kind of inner sound in silence. However, unlike simply calming down, the audience would feel a call to contemplate what they are hearing. While it does not seem to appeal to the physical sense as art is conventionally accepted to, silence is used as a form of artistic expression, and was certainly a *pièce de résistance* of Cage’s as it challenged the definition of music entirely. The controversy the piece caused aside, it prompts us to rethink the meaning of silence.

Of course, music is not the only art form that can utilise silence as a form of expression. Shakespeare’s plays often feature silence, which is a dramatic element used to express a character’s indescribable emotion. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to talk about sensations with mere words. Words may be clumsy or not able to present one’s emotions accurately. Mimes are another form of play which puts even more emphasis on silence. As one of its core defining features, mime stresses the actors’ self-expression without the use of verbal communication, but the other means of communication. It makes miming all the more sophisticated because the auditory perception is not involved, thus allowing for more prominent actions and attracting the focus of the audience to follow the performance. The art of mime exploits the other paths of conveyance of meaning. When it comes to human communication, silence can speak a thousand words. In fact, silence is most used in daily situations – eye contact is a unique mode of communication in humans, and the eyes, as the windows to the soul, can express a wide variety of emotions without having to say a single word. Eyes are a more moving and intimate way of describing thoughts of characters in literature.

When we mention silence, there are two particular disabilities that come to mind: hearing loss and muteness. One is not able to perceive sound, the other unable to pronounce. In literature, these two disabilities deprive the characters of their capacities to speak or hear, but do not interfere with their capabilities to do great things in terms of major themes such as love or friendship. The Little Mermaid (in the original version of the well-known fairy tale) had a beautiful voice until she asked the Sea Witch to cut off her tongue in exchange for mortal body (and immortal soul) as a human. Not being able to speak indirectly leads to the prince marrying a princess instead of her. However, she does not choose to kill the prince with a dagger given to her by the Sea Witch to save herself and become a mermaid once more, but kills herself instead and earns the chance to rise up to heaven. She gives up her life for the one she loves and an immortal soul, which causes her great pain. In real life, Helen Keller became blind and deaf in early childhood. However, she managed to defy the odds and learn to speak using her sense of touch. Her perceived silence did not limit her, and eventually she was able to combat this major barrier and become an influential speaker. If she had never endured the complete silence that troubled her, would she have been the great lecturer we know of today? For her, silence was a stepping stone to success. From her autobiography *The Story of My Life*, “Is it not true, then, that my life with all its limitations touches at many points the life of the World Beautiful? Everything has its wonders, even darkness and silence, and I learn, whatever state I may be in, therein to be content.”

While noise is often what defines the environment, silence is another dimension that appeals to more than just the sense of hearing, but an innate ‘sixth sense’. Silence is used to create tension, suspense or spookiness in a scene, and a silent setting sometimes triggers fear in characters, who may begin to feel something ‘supernatural’. In Gothic horror works, for example, silence instils fear of the unknown or unpredictable to the reader, who knows that the environment is sinister simply because no movement is detected through hearing. In contrast, in romantic works, silence is used to show tranquillity. Instead of being associated with eeriness, silence produces a peaceful effect. Silence can cause distress, but also bring peace of mind and calm one down. In other words, depending on context, silence can create a wide range of settings for stories.

There is also scientific meaning in silence, which implies room for exploration. *The Eerie Silence: Renewing Our Search for Alien Intelligence* is a science text by physicist Paul Davies which discusses whether there are other intelligent species in the vast expanse of space. The simple lack of ‘sound’ is a signal that there may be something in uncharted territory to discover. Silence here may be a metaphor, but could nonetheless be a beacon for human curiosity – as we are ‘deaf’ to certain areas, we would actively open our ears and listen for what is new.

Therefore, not only has silence had an influence on the arts, but also the channels through which we learn and our psychology. Moreover, history and literature have given us an in-depth look into the nature of silence. I would rather not say that we have reached a conclusion on what silence is exactly, but we have come a step closer to understanding a very abstract concept of great value. We should still continue to open our ears to ‘listen to silence’, so that we may learn more about its story. Given the known purposes of silence, could there be more? Perhaps we humans may be able to better utilize silence to improve all aspects of life. Silence, in my opinion, is one of the most versatile qualities of the world.

We have not been grateful enough to silence. There is only one way to repay her contributions to mankind, and that is to enjoy her, for silence is a speechless mentor, who has served us in various ways throughout history.