

Silence has a variety of implications. It could indicate discomfort, annoyance, fatigue and many other emotions that lie turbulent underneath the absence of audible sound. Apart from its literal sense, 'a lack of sound or noise' as defined by Merriam-Webster, silence is overflowing with figurative meanings.

For centuries, silence is associated with oppression as well as erasure of one's identity and heritage. One of the most prominent examples is the silencing of black slaves, dating back to the mid-15th century. Their voices were silenced; they were rid of any expression of personal opinion and were not allowed to speak up for themselves. Their side of the story, the abuse and trauma underwent, was muted in history books throughout the centuries. Their silence led to widespread belief that they were inferior and created an acidic form of internalised hatred. The absence of a voice suppressed the black community. That is of course, until civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr broke free from the chains of silence and delivered impassioned speeches, bringing global attention to racial injustice that lingers in America decades after President Lincoln abolished slavery. Even with this newfound clamour, black people continued to fight back with quiet dignity. Rosa Parks exhibited determination and defiance through a silent gesture – refusing to give up her seat for a white passenger. Throughout the ordeal, Parks may have spoken but it was by no means a speech delivered with King's vigour. Her quiet defiance truly reflects the hidden power of silence, mirroring its natural properties.

Even up till this day, what we claim to be the pinnacle of human achievement harbours an unspeakable amount of silence. Different people are emerging from the dark depths of their oppression and it has come to light that it was not only minorities that are being silenced: victims of sexual assault, child abuse, the transgender community and many others have come forward to expose the truth. In the modern world, being silent means that you are taking the side of the offender. As said by Martin Luther King Jr., 'The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people.' This act of passivity is becoming more and more criticised by today's global citizens and the message is clear: silence is made to be broken.

Apart from being the representation of the oppressed, silence symbolises reflection. Here in Hong Kong, silence is difficult to create. The heart of commerce beats underneath the soles of our feet and the steady thuds of fast-walking commuters are

etched into my brain. Despite the omnipresent cacophony of city life, I often find myself immersed in the silence of religion. Every Sunday morning as I attend church, the stillness that falls after the ringing of the bells is an earthy, tangible aspect of Catholicism. The serenity of the scene, the unison in which the church utters their profession of love to Christ and the unity in which they fall silent as they repent to welcome Him into their hearts compels my soul to reflect upon itself. The clanging of the metal choir only further amplifies the serenity of silence and the sense of solemnity is indisputably heightened. Afterwards, when I would aimlessly saunter back home, I would pass by the temple where Pagans gather to worship. The low mutter of foreign deities is visible through the breath of incense. I look on as the smoke curled and battled the surrounding air.

Meditation is a method in which silence can be exploited for the invigoration of one's psyche. For some, the intensity of absolute silence bears down upon them and they find it a useless form of relaxation. As for me, the stillness and the motionlessness bridging the start and the finish brings about an unspeakably enlightening experience. Everything fades into irrelevance. Time is no longer a worry. There are only two entities in the process of meditation – thoughts and silence. Silence is a crucial part of human existence that is often overlooked; it is essential in collecting wandering thoughts and provides opportunity for reflection upon our purpose on this Earth.

Another misconception about silence is that it causes immediate harm to relationships. While complete lack of communication does lead to crumbling bonds between faithful friends, a healthy relationship should be able to withstand periods of silence. Many of my friends cannot stand silence at the lunch table. Whenever the unspeakable begins to fall, they quickly interject with an anecdote or ask flustered questions to keep someone chattering. Their fear of silence stems from a lack of knowledge of what true friendship is capable of. Silence between friends is fragile yet strengthening. The comfort of being able to simply bask in each other's company is an ethereal and heart-warming experience. Allow unspoken words to accumulate in the air, if you feel the incessant need to fill up your relationships with empty sounds instead of allowing amiable silence to participate in conversations; is your bond with them really that genuine?

Stoicism is often linked with silence. Famous characters in literature such as Mr. Darcy from 'Pride and Prejudice' are portrayed as stoic, unreadable people through their trademark silence. Darcy's silence throughout the novel illustrates Austen's idea that lack of spoken communication can be interpreted in many ways. His taciturnity

could reflect his superior social status which permits him to be as haughty as he pleases; or it could hint at his social ineptness and shyness rather than pride as most people first perceive.

Darcy's awkward silence before his first proposal to Elizabeth is a renowned literary example of how silence builds up tension and anticipation in readers. The use of silence to attribute to the climax of a story is timeless. 200 years after Austen's time, it is still applied to plays such as 'A Streetcar Named Desire'. Right before the breaking point of the play, tension is stretched out by the silence of the characters during a 'dismal birthday supper'. The unimpressive stillness of such a jovial event only emphasizes Stanley's sudden rage and cruelty towards Blanche in the latter part of the scene. It is evident that silence is a universally employed device to create suspense since at every awards show, the announcement of the winner is always given after a certain length of breath-baiting silence.

'Silence is the most powerful scream'. When I was a small girl, I thought of this phrase as nothing more than the oxymoronic whim of some aspiring writer. I still do. However, it does ring with more sense now that I have spent time reflecting upon human nature. A scream embodies what we feel during the moment. It is a source of outlet designed for a raw throat to expel raw emotion. It is primal, reeking of rancid frustration and anger. It is human.

Silence conceals. Silence suffocates the soul. Silence seals up the searing pain.

Just think back to your childhood. Whenever you were reprimanded by your mother, you would feel humiliated or even indignant, am I right? Compare that feeling to the time when you've angered her so severely she wouldn't even talk to you. If you never had this experience, I applaud you and I hope you will never have to go through it. Envision the phrase I mentioned, 'Silence is the most powerful scream'. A mother's deliberate silence towards you is the embodiment of the spirit of that quote. The sheer disappointment is expressed through auditory nothingness and is simply,

Torturous.

Silence can be present in more subtle and ominous form. Distinguishable noises can be heard, the physicality of silence is eradicated in this aspect but the tone is empty. Consonants and vowels form words that tumble out of weary mouths. This is what I like to call the silence of depression.

There is a concealed silence between the context and the heart. A disconnect between a broken spirit and elegant vocabulary results in unavoidable silence. The noises expressed only fills up space, meaningless and flat. Speaking from first-hand experience, depression mutes everything: surroundings, weather, thoughts, and emotions - everything feels totally muddled, like silt swirling in a shallow puddle. What I say never really matches with what I feel, so speaking is no different than silence. The hollowness of words gradually succumbs to the shattering silence and you become mute to the world and surrender yourself to the vacuum of mental illness.

It is interesting to remember that for the deaf, silence is all they have ever known. What could it possibly feel like to never understand sound? For them, silence is purely conceptual. It has no significance for them, which in turn allows me to be grateful for being able to experience silence as opposed to never knowing it. We often take silence for granted; believing it to be a natural state of the world without taking those who yearn to learn what silent is into consideration.

Silence can be conveyed in various ways. As I have demonstrated here, the extra space and asterisks between the previous paragraph and this one creates the illusion of silence and space. Despite being an auditory device, silence can be portrayed in written format as such or with blank pages. It is an expression of emptiness but beneath the façade of nothingness, an intricate web of meanings awaits us. Now that we are nearing the end of this essay and approach my eventual silence, sit back, ponder, and appreciate the silence.