



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES

An International Open-Access Peer Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.064

E-ISSN : 2249 – 4642

P-ISSN: 2454 - 4671

## SILENCE IN JANE URQUHART'S *THE STONE CARVERS*

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.37648/ijrssh.v12i03.007>

**Paper Received:**

21 May 2022

**Paper Accepted:**

14 July 2022

**Paper Received After Correction:**

18 July 2022

**Paper Published:**

20 July 2022



**How to cite the article:** Abbas H.A.(2022)

Silence in Jane Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers*, *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences & Humanities*, Jul-Sep 2022 Vol. 12, Issue 3; 88-94 DOI:

<http://doi.org/10.37648/ijrssh.v12i03.007>

## ABSTRACT

Silence is traditionally recognized as a space of time in which words are not articulated and meaning is not conveyed. But, silence emerges to have a variety of meanings in literary texts, and that meaning is determined by the context within which silence is placed. The treatment of the theme of silence in 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction is associated with social injustice and war violence. As shown in the writings of that century, silence replaces feelings and ideas that the authors and/or their characters cannot find the words which can express the victims' profound pain. In *The Stone Carvers* (2001), Canadian novelist Jane Urquhart introduces silence as moments of unspoken language, each moment produces two, or more, oppositional meanings, which may affect the characters differently. This research sheds light on the moments of silence that are shown in Urquhart's novel.

**Keywords:** *pain, silence, victim, unspoken language, identity*

## INTRODUCTION

Silence is traditionally recognized as a space of time during which the conversation between two persons, or more, is totally absent. No articulation is made and no meaning is conveyed. Alina Lemak introduces silence as “periods of non-speech or non-vocalization in conversation” (Lemak, 2012, p.6).

Theodor Reik talks about “meaningful silence”, stating that each space of silence has a certain meaning to convey (Reik, 1968, p.183). Similarly, Biok Behnam and Nastaran Nosratzadegan elaborate on the meaning of silence which, according to him, “can...convey various meaning and perform a range of functions” (Behnam & Nosratzadegan, 2014, p.161). However, it is Renee Gendron who makes a significant point on the meaning of silence when he says that “silence has multiple possible meaning, rather than a singular essential

meaning” (Gendron, 2011, p.2). For him, “the meaning of silence depends on the context in which it occurs” (Ibid, p. 3).

Although it appeared earlier, silence has become a dominant motif in fiction during the first half of the twentieth century. This dominance is attributed to the social injustice and violence— military in particular. As a result, novelists focus on characters who have been silenced by the oppressive social and political systems of the time. They are denied the right to express themselves and uncover their pain and suffering in these hard times. Ihab Hassan opines that “a recourse to silence in the twentieth century is indicative of a heightened consciousness of language's inefficacy and contingency” (Dauncey, 2003, p.6).

Literary theorists approach silence differently. Feminists, for instance, contend that women's silence is something enforced by patriarchal societies which

deprive women of the right to protest social injustice and gender oppression. Thus, “the voice of the woman, raised loudly enough...[is required] to...shatter the patriarchal tradition” (Booker, 1969, p.94). Post-colonial scholars also denounce the silence imposed by the colonizers on their subjects. Frantz Fanon argues that the voice of the colonized is fundamental to their existence, saying that for these oppressed natives “to speak is to exist absolutely for the other” (Fanon, 1974, p.8).

To signify the importance of silence in fiction, one needs to turn to Bret Rappaport who suggests that silence in literary texts is not much different from zero in mathematics. Like zero, the real thematic value of silence is determined by the context within which silence is placed. In supporting that idea, Sarah Dauncey remarks that “the function of silence within fiction differs depending upon its narrative context” (Dauncey, 2003, p.2).

This research aims at showing the significance of silence in *The Stone Carvers*, a novel by Jane Urquhart. Urquhart is a contemporary Canadian novelist who has written, so far, eight novels that focus on Canadian experiences. She is acclaimed as one of the promising Canadian literary voices. Her fictional characters are mainly silenced individuals

who “set out in life with major hopes and end up living in a minor key. It is this plaintive melody that makes her writing so resonant” (Roger, 2015, p.1).

### OPTIONAL AND ENFORCED SILENCE

Urquhart introduces a notion that silence could be realized as of two kinds, optional and enforced. While one of the speaking parties which is engaged in a conversation willingly opts silence to attain a certain objective, the other party suffers from that silence which has undesirably been enforced upon them. These two kinds of silence could be narratively traced in the story of Eaman and Klara, two young characters who live in a village called Shoneval. Eaman is a close friend to Klara’s family. He comes to the family’s farmhouse and sits for long hours in the kitchen while Klara is doing her domestic works. Still, he keeps silent during these visits without saying any word to Klara who acts nervously to break this silence.

While he sat in silence, evening after evening in the large far kitchen, Klara performed her domestic duties noisily, banging stove lids, rattling dishes in the pan, slamming the bottom drawers of the hutch cupboard. (Urquhart, 2001, p.36)

Thus, while silence is an option for Eaman that is used to capture her attention, it is disturbingly enforced upon Klara. The latter appears acting consistently to break that silence. The assumption that silence is either optional or enforced is substantially sustained by Mehdi Aghamohammadi who theorizes that “silence can be self-imposed or the result of external constraints” (Aghamohammadi, 2017, p.21).

### **OPPOSITIONAL MEANINGS OF SILENCE**

Another thematic idea that Urquhart acts to introduce about silence is that, it produces two oppositional meanings once it is placed within a context. While it makes some positive effects on some character, silence may affect other characters negatively. Monica Brito Vieira elaborates on the conflicting meanings of silence, saying: “Silence [is] either linking or separating, active or inactive, assenting or dissenting” (Vieira, 2020, p. 976).

Urquhart supports the idea that silence could make two oppositional meanings when she talks about ‘comfortable’ and ‘uncomfortable silence’ (pp.203, 242). However, the two oppositional meanings of silence could be traced in the following conversation between Eaman and Klara:

Klara: “Why do you never speak?”

Eamon: .....

Klara: “Say something”

Eamon: “What is it you would have me say?” (Ibid, p.42)

Thus, Eaman is happy to see that, silence has successfully stirred Klara’s attention towards him. In contrast, Klara is bitterly disappointed with that silence because it caused her not to get the romantic words of love that she has desired Eaman to articulate.

### **SILENCE AS POWER**

The author Urquhart develops a notion that silence can also be a kind of power that enables the fictional character to escape a question about his/her past. In this regard, one needs to quote from Renee Gendron who suggests that:

Silence can be manifestation of power, the action of one party refusing to discuss one or more topics another party wishes to consider. (Gendron, 2011, p.2)

The power of silence that enables one speaking party to escape a certain question is narratively seen in the story of Tilman, Klara’s brother who is one of the major characters in the novel. As a child, Tilman is fond of exploring the world around him. He leaves his farmhouse for hours trying to explore life and nature of

the surrounding farms. This puts his family in horror over his safety and whereabouts. At the age of twelve, Tilman's fascination with the world outside his family's farm increases. He leaves his family for days, moving from town to town and showing a profound desire not to stay in one place. This makes his mother obliged to detain him to keep him home. One day, Tilman decides to leave his family and never come back. When he is at large, Tilman uses silence to hide his life story from the others:

If anyone questioned him, asked where he came from, where he was going, or what he was doing, he would disappear before they finished speaking, making certain to turn a corner or slip into a woodlot so they could no longer see him (Urquhart, 2001, p. 60).

By this, moving away from people becomes one of the strategic ways of silence that one can resort to maintain the secrecy of his/her past.

Urquhart introduces the term of "the ownership of [the] past" (Ibid, p. 360), to suggest that silence is a power in the hands of those who tell stories about their past. This could be realized in the story of Klara and Eaman. When WWII erupted, Eaman decided to enlist and went to Europe. He was later declared missing

in a major battle in France. Since then, Klara lives alone hopelessly.

When her brother Tilman, who has been absent from his family for decades, comes back to find his sister Klara living alone in the family house after their parents' death. He tells her that he has enlisted and participated in WWII battles in France. He is among a few Canadian military men who survived the bloody fighting in Seige. When he finds her profoundly depressed, he asks her:

Tilman: "so you're tired of your life here."

Klara: "I'm tired, I'm tired of everyone leaving me, going to wars..."

Tilman: "Who went off to the war, Klara? I thought you said no one went."

Klara: 'silent but whispered' "No one but one, I said, no one but one."

Tilman: "And where is this one now?"

Klara: "He's dead." (Ibid, p.256-57)

Indeed, Klara's refusal to reveal the name of that person reflects her desire not to let others know her story with the man she loves. By this, silence takes a new turn, silence here is not saying no words, but is not saying the words that the listeners require.

**SILENCE AND IDENTITY**

Urquhart’s novel makes a significant point when she introduces silence as an identity issue. For her, silence enables characters to conceal one’s identity. In this regard, the power of silence in hiding one’s identity could be recognized in the story of Klara in the monumental construction site in France. In her forties, Klara goes to France to participate in constructing the monument on the memories of thousands of Canadian soldiers who went missing during WWII. As a carver, Klara goes to France to give representation to her old friend Eaman in that monument. When Klara is told that women are not employed for that project, she decides to hide her feminine identity. She cuts her hair and covers it with a cap wearing men’s uniform. But, her brother Tilman tells her disguise is not enough to hide her female identity:

Tilman: “What are you going to do about your voice?”

Klara: “What do you mean?”

Tilman: “How are you going to talk...without revealing you are a woman?”

Klara: “We’ll say I had a terrible childhood disease that affected my vocal chords.”

Tilman: .....

Klara: “I was intending to whisper. There’s no male or female voice in a whisper”

Tilman: “You will have to do it all the time.”

Klara: “Yes, all the time” (Urquhart, 2001, pp.260-61).

Thus, whispering, as “unvoiced speech” (Cirillo, 2004), becomes a mode of silence that is used to enable Klara to hide her identity.

Silence may turn into a moment of pleasure and harmony between two lovers when they honestly declare their love to each other. This could be realized between Klara and Giorgio, another Canadian carver. It has not gone so long when Klara’s identity as a female is revealed, but she is allowed to continue working in the monumental site. Giorgio soon becomes attracted to Klara, but the latter is not so responsive to him. She is not ready to be involved in a new love relationship because she is still devoted to the memory of her first lover, Eaman. She strongly believes that it is too late for a woman at the forties to play a game of love again:

Klara: “I thought all of that was over for me, years ago, decades ago.”

Giorgio: “It is not over.”

Klara: “Do you not want a younger woman? What about children?”

Giorgio: “I want you.”

Klara: “Good night, then.”

Giorgio: “I’ll wait for you? Tomorrow night?” (Urquhart, 2002, p. 370)

Then, “they stood together silently for some time” (Ibid). Indeed, this moment of silence between Klara and Giorgio is a silence of pleasure and harmony in the sense that before leaving Klara “wrapped her arm around his large chest” (Ibid). Thus, silence here becomes more expressive than any speech that can be uttered on the ground that lovers are “more comfortable with silence than with speech” (Ibid, p. 203).

## CONCLUSION

The use of silence in a literary text is a phenomena that is associated with social injustice and political violence that troubles life since 19<sup>th</sup> century. To be silent does not necessarily mean that one has nothing to say, but s/he is unable to find the words that articulate their thoughts. Meaning that is contained in moments of silence is an argumentative issue. Not only because the meaning is determined by the context that silence is placed within, but also because it makes oppositional meanings wherever it

appears. Silence itself is not always an option that is resorted to by one speaker to attain a certain purpose. It may also be received, meanwhile, as a reluctant thing that is imposed on the other speaker in that conversation. In the end, a great deal of thematic ideas could be investigated in novels in which silence is narratively employed.

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