

"Silence as Literary Device in Ambrose Bierce's 'The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge'"
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Abstract: Sometimes moments of silence become more significant and express much more than clearly spelt out words. Strategically placed silences and omissions within a given text posit *silence* as an effective literary device. This article discusses Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" to show how, in the process of meaning construction through atmosphere, absence and psychological insight, *silence* proves to be an effective literary device.

Keywords: silence, perception, psychological time, stream of thought.

'In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story'.

- Foe, J. M. Coetzee

When faced by the disjunction between the idealistic assumptions of humanity and the gruesome atrocities of reality, authors struggle with artistic representation in any narrative. Literary devices assist in overcoming this struggle. In a narrative, literary devices are techniques used by an author to effectively convey intended meanings. Irony, flashback, foreshadowing and figurative language are the most commonly used devices in a literary text. But sometimes, authors effectively use omissions and absences within the literary text to enhance the overall effect of meaning construction. These silences are used in the process of disclosure to show and suggest physical and psychological realities that overwhelm the senses.

Silence performs multiple functions in Ambrose Bierce's "The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge". Firstly, the silence on the part of the narrator as to the exact sequence of events that lead to Farquhar's hanging creates an atmosphere of uncertainty that forces the reader to read between the lines and bring out the unwritten narrative. Secondly, the silence of the soldiers reflects the human capacity for extreme violence and the simultaneous denial of the severity of their actions through silent detachment. And, thirdly, Farquhar's silence and passivity during his hanging gives more space to examine stoic responses to disorienting circumstances and dream states that reveal suppressed anxiety. It also allows space for access to the internal thoughts of Farquhar to reveal his actual torment and reassessment of his priorities.

The first thing to be noticed in Bierce's short story is that *silence* creates an intense atmosphere, develops an uncertain mood and encourages psychological

characterization. Ambrose Bierce is an author whose narratives obscure, hide, or in some cases completely withhold specific plot details. The story begins moments before the ending of the story, where a civilian named Peyton Farquhar is ready to be hanged during the Civil war in America. Yet the first section of the story tells the reader nothing about the details of his crime nor is he even introduced properly.

The inevitability of death stifles the atmosphere and finds expression in the narrator's voice. Embedded in that narration is a matter-of-fact tone in which the narrator cynically describes events. According to Bierce's own definition in *A Devil's Dictionary*, a cynic is a 'blackguard whose faulty vision causes him to see things as they are, not as they ought to be.' Maybe because Bierce saw war so closely and for so long, he could comment on it so cynically and recreate such gruesomely ironic situations. It may be mentioned here that Bierce began his service as a private in the Ninth Indiana Infantry in April, 1861 at the age of 19. An excellent soldier, he was rapidly promoted to a sergeant-major (Owens 82). His narratives – with all the repulsive images of death and destruction - show that he had first hand experience of war. His cynicism finds expression in the portrayal of an atmosphere stilled by silence. And, through this silence he reveals all that is usually silenced about the reality of war.

Bierce brings out elements of the war and corresponding emotions that many other writers are silent about – final realizations of what is important in life and the futility and gruesomeness of war. The female voice has no presence in the usual social emphasis on narratives of bravery and sacrifice in war. Thus, Mrs. Farquhar has no voice except as a presence of silent domesticity, happy to serve water to the thirsty scout with 'her own white hands.' Only moments before his death, Farquhar truly appreciates the presence of his wife and all the beauty, love and caring that she represents as he visions her with a 'smile of ineffable joy, an attitude of matchless grace and dignity.' He sees her welcoming him with outreached arms.

In opposition, all the soldiers witnessing and performing the required actions of Farquhar's hanging are 'silent' and fixated on their job. They are as stiff as stone statues - mute observers and unquestioning puppets. All the narrator tells us of the silence of the soldiers is that, 'In the code of military etiquette silence and fixity are forms of deference.' In other words, silence is submission and acceptance. For, as the narrator tells us, 'Death is a dignitary who when he comes announced is to be received with formal manifestations of respect, even by those most familiar with him.' Silence hovers over

why a "gentleman" of such kindly expression" and who was no "vulgar assassin" had to be hanged.

In reality soldiers stay sane by convincing themselves that their actions are justified, and their job requires unquestioning loyalty. Through their silence Bierce seems to emphasize that war has its own set of rules in which the presence of humanity and justice are namesake. Bierce shows how in wartime humanity suffers in the name of justice as soldiers are forced to become insensitive to death and destruction in order to keep their sanity and justify their actions.

One has to keep in mind that Bierce's representations of the happenings of the Civil War are not limited to the simple description of it. Rather, he also highlights the effects of war on the human mind and emotions. For example, in his final moments Farquhar does not worry about his failed attempt of sabotage or his ideals, he thinks of his family. Yet, it is he who put his family in jeopardy for a wasted attempt of bravery. Interestingly, at the moment of his hanging he reassesses his priorities. Suddenly life and family become more meaningful than any idealistic attempt of bravery.

The silence of the desperate Farquhar moments before his hanging disguises his extreme desperation. His overwhelming situation pleads for expression but still he is silent. This stoical response does not indicate an absence of emotion rather, it is a form of denial and suppression of deep-seated anxiety. The reader comes across this contradiction as s/he enters Farquhar's psychological world. The atmosphere is intense with frustration and fear and the silence becomes more significant in its lack of physical expression.

Bierce effectively uses the silence of the protagonist of his story to portray the suffering and psychological torment that is present even when words are not uttered and shrieks of pain cannot be heard. Uttered sounds create the physical world of reality. A single gasp of "Uh!" or "Ah!" reflects the discomfort of a situation, whilst, a euphoric exclamation of joy expresses the happiness of an elated soul. Yet, at times, silence reveals more pain than words can express.

Farquhar's silence seems to be a stoic acceptance of fate which denies individual expression and resistance to it. The absence of Farquhar's resistance leads to silence. There is only silence, no scuffling of feet, no grunts, no moans or groans. In silence Farquhar stares at "the stream racing madly beneath his feet." Then his sight is fixated on a piece of driftwood dancing with the current. Here his perception starts to change

and the racing stream now appears "sluggish." It is at this moment that the reader enters Farquhar's thoughts and all silence seems to dissipate.

Bierce breaks the silence of the moment through the use of a narrative technique that well maybe a precursor to the stream-of-consciousness technique used by writers such as James Joyce, William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, Arundhati Roy, Naguib Mahfuz and many others. He uses the technique as a means to reach into the psyche and spread it out, as it were, for all to see the underlying currents of thought and emotion that trouble Farquhar. Thus, by placing Farquhar's consciousness before the reader, the narrative simultaneously retains and breaks the silence. This technique allows for the simultaneous presence of two contrasting ontological realities within the same time span. This temporal and ontological disjunction sometimes confuses the reader who finds the silence of the physical situation incompatible with the noise of the psychological situation.

For Bierce's reading audience in 1890 the omissions in narration and irregular movement in time put undue pressure on the reader used to having all details clearly stated. The silence of his narrator regarding clear sequential facts that lead to the hanging of Farquhar results in gaps in the storyline which ignite curiosity within the reader. Strategically, these omissions are left open for the reader to fill in. As a result when the story was first published many readers then considered the text to be incomplete, unnecessarily disjointed and inconsistent. For readers of today, on the other hand, who are familiar with time distortion and used to techniques and strategies used in stream-of-consciousness narratives, psychological realism, magic realism, etc., the text is much easier to access.

The narrator's partial silence, therefore, necessitates a different set of skills on the part of the reader. Aspects of psychology are intertwined with a narrative technique that attempts to show unspoken and unexpressed thoughts and emotions. The reader has to fill in the gaps through an understanding of how the human mind works and also comprehend how Bierce shows those workings in artistic representation.

Farquhar in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" imagines his escape and return to his family, in the few precious moments of his life between the removal of the plank that supports him and his actual death by hanging. It takes Farquhar two days to reach his destination. It is, at this point in the narrative that it is sometimes quite difficult to differentiate between physical happenings and those going on in the mind. Time has been stretched. For, once the narrative enters the human consciousness anything is

possible. This seemingly impossible occurrence can be understood with reference to Bergson's concept of psychological time as opposed to clock-time. What is now common knowledge first found expression in Bergson's theory on the perception of time, i.e., our perception of time depends on our mood and emotions at that given moment. If we feel happy time passes quickly, if we feel burdened or depressed time prolongs itself.

In his *Essai sur la durée immédiate de la conscience* (1889) and other such essays Henri Bergson (1859-1941), a French philosopher who got the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1928, distinguished the difference between our actual experience of time (psychological time) as intuitively perceived as a datum of consciousness and the contrasting measurement of it in terms of "clock-time." What is now general common sense was then theoretically expressed in his work. It is common knowledge now that in a minute of 'clock-time' we can cover the duration of many days in psychological time. Bierce uses this possibility to show the roaming of thoughts at the crucial moments where life and death merge. Time dissolves into nothingness as the consciousness struggles to come to terms with inevitable death.

At this point the reader is faced with Farquhar's perception of reality. According to the American Heritage Medical Dictionary (2007), perception is the "recognition and interpretation of sensory stimuli based chiefly on memory." Thus, in attempting to understand the thought stream of Farquhar one thing is to be kept in mind, i.e., the emotions and previous experience of Farquhar as highlighted by Bierce, combine to manipulate Farquhar's perception of reality. Mieke Bal says:

Perception depends on so many factors that striving for objectivity is pointless. To mention only a few factors: one's position with respect to the perceived object, the fall of the light, the distance, the previous knowledge, psychological attitude towards the object; all this and more affects the picture one forms and passes on to others. (100)

What Bal emphasizes here is that the perceiver's mood, situation, previous experience etc. and many other elements influence the reception of objects and events through the senses. In other words, perception allows for the distortion of reality through the senses.

Since Farquhar is struggling to come to terms with his inevitable end, every sound reminds him of the power of death, his lack of time and the helplessness of his situation. Therefore, when he closes his eyes to remember his dear ones his thoughts are broken by the sound of his watch. Each tick is like a hammer banging reminding him of a death knell. He cannot tolerate the thought of his final fate thus we notice his

extreme restlessness. The ticking noise cannot actually be as loud as he considers it to be. But he perceives the sound to be unbearably loud since his mind and emotions link the ticking to passing of the few moments of life he has left. Thus, the sound of Farquhar's watch imposing on his senses is significant here because it symbolically represents his realization of his life being reduced to the few moments he now has to live.

Moments before his hanging, Farquhar feels his senses sharpen as he realizes the intense pressure of his situation on his mind and emotions. He hears a gradually increasing sound breaking his stoic silence. He cannot ignore, "a sharp, distinct, metallic percussion like the stroke of a blacksmith's hammer." His fear was mounting. The silence between each strike was "maddening" and he feared he would shout out in agony. Surprisingly, the unbearable sound was actually the ticking of his watch. This opens up to the reader the fact that though he was calm and contained on the outside, his inner world was agonizingly and painfully noisy. Like the narrator in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell Tale Heart" who is maddened by the illusory sound of his victim's heartbeat, Farquhar is maddened by the ticking of his watch. But whereas for Poe's protagonist the sound is just an auditory hallucination prompted by guilt, Bierce's protagonist faces an acute rise in auditory perception which signifies his awareness of the stifling of time moments before his death.

Our present perception of an event is defined by our previous experience of it. Thus, memory has a major role to play in perception and giving momentum to thought. Memory is the recalling of past events into present thought. When referring to the stream of thought William James in his chapter "The Stream of Thought" tells us that "Experience is re-moulding us every moment, and our mental reaction on every given thing is really a resultant of our experience of the whole world up to that date." Whenever we come across something, be it idea or object, our memory instantaneously connects it to some former experience as well as taking the present into consideration. The experience related to that object differs accordingly.

Within the stream of thought, memory functions through association. Association, in turn, influences the thought-stream. Images, objects and sounds work as triggers for association as memory gives them significance. These triggers are based on memory of previous encounters with that specific image, object or sound. For example, the piece of driftwood that Farquhar notices at the moment he is being hanged would normally mean nothing but at that particular moment is highly significant because, as we learn later, his

hopes of burning the bridge were based on the "great quantity of driftwood against the wooden pier" which, he was told by the scout, was "dry and would burn like tow." The piece of driftwood becomes part of his consciousness and as he watches it drift down stream he too drifts into semi-conscious thoughts.

Consequently, the piece of driftwood becomes a significant part of Farquhar's consciousness. And, after the reader reads section II of the short story, that very seem piece of driftwood is linked in the reader's consciousness to the deception of the scout. Gradually the reader is drawn into the silence, secrecy and conspiracy of the story only to be shocked out of it by the turmoil surrounding Farquhar's escape and return home and the unexpected realization that "Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge." The reader is confronted with the fact that all the turmoil and noise that happens occurs on the psychological plain within the short expanse of Farquhar's being hanged from a bridge and his actual death as a result of it.

As Farquhar was losing his consciousness he could only feel himself move like a vast pendulum. He was tormented by the physical pain. All capability to reason and logic were lost. There was only torment until suddenly there was a loud splash. Silence was removed by a frightful roaring in his ears as he felt himself sinking. Struggling to free himself from the noose he was beating the water vigorously. When he managed to emerge from the water without the noose tightening his airway, he took a deep breath and gave a loud shriek thereby releasing all his pent up emotions. As the reader enters his thoughts s/he comes across a very dramatic escape from the gruesome reality of the hanging. But, of course, the drama – the splash of water, the sound of guns being fired, shouts and yells of the soldiers – all happens in Farquhar's head, while in the physical world there is only silence.

Within the consciousness thus physical happenings and dream visions intertwine. Bierce's Farquhar is silently approaching the final moments of his life whilst in his head he is putting up a struggle of his lifetime to return to his family. Temporal and ontological freedom found in the representation of Farquhar's consciousness allows for recurrent transition between the real and the illusory. In his imagination Farquhar acts on all that he thought of in the brief moments before the soldier removed his weight from the plank. As Farquhar's awareness of the outside world dissolves into the inner stream of his thoughts, his imagination finds momentum. He is no longer defeated, bound and silenced by his helpless situation for his thoughts can transgress time and place.

In short, in Bierce's short story, what begins in silence ends in silence. The atmosphere is imbued with silence and conspiracy, the third person narrator omits details, the female voice is absent, the soldiers refuse to acknowledge the harshness of their actions, and the protagonist silently awaits his fate whilst enacting a psychological drama. This is how silence becomes as strong a literary device as any other. The non-expression in itself becomes highly expressive. Thus, in Bierce's story we discover how silence intensifies the atmosphere, emphasizes the unspeakable nature of the cruelty of war and deception, questions the idealism justifying death and destruction in war and disguises the intense suffering within the human psyche which seeks consolation in images of happiness in the direst of times.

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