

Silence in John Steinbeck's *The Moon is Down*

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□ ABSTRACT □

*This paper examines silence as a paralinguistic device fulfilling a variety of communicative functions and meanings in John Steinbeck's novel *The Moon is Down*. Silence expresses negative and positive meanings like refusal, resentment, contempt, personal exploration and mutual understanding. Such meanings are examined in terms of two types of silence observed in the novel: silence proper and silence of static scenes and moments. Thus, the paper demonstrates that silence is as expressive and meaningful as language and cannot be viewed as the absence of speech.*

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الصمت في رواية جون شتاينبك "أقول القمر"

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□ ملخص □

تعالج هذه الدراسة الصمت كوسيلة غير لغوية، تعبر عن وظائف اتصالية مختلفة في رواية الكاتب جون شتاينبك "أقول القمر". يعبر الصمت عن معانٍ سلبية وإيجابية، مثل: الرفض، والازدراء، واستكشاف المرء لنفسه وللآخرين، والتفاهم المتبادل بين الأفراد. وقد درست هذه المعاني من خلال نوعين من الصمت في هذه الرواية: الصمت الذي يشير إليه الكاتب صراحة، والصمت الذي يشير إليه ضمناً في الفقرات التي تصف المشاهد اللحظات الساكنة. وهكذا تبين الدراسة أن الصمت وسيلة تعبير، مثلها مثل اللغة تماماً، وأن الصمت لا يدل فقط على غياب الكلام والمعاني.

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Introduction:

Language is not always the sole medium of communication. Other means than sounds and words can actually fulfill this function. For instance, nodding, gestures, silence and the like can be as communicative as language. However, most of the research on communication has focused upon the linguistic medium rather than the nonlinguistic, or as it is commonly known as the paralinguistic, one. As a matter of fact, very little research has been carried out on the nonlinguistic means. Silence as a paralinguistic means of communication has attracted the attention of a few researchers. Tannen and Saville-Torike (1985-xi), for instance, state that silence as a component of human communication is relatively neglected. Also, Saville-Torike (1985:3) says that silence, apart from its use as a marker of the beginning and end of an utterance, has been neglected within linguistics and viewed as the absence of speech. Accordingly, more research, it seems, is still needed in this area.

Attempting to understand the communicative value of silence, a few scholars have investigated the behavior of people involved in some sort of interaction in different cultures. For example, the silence behavior practised by Italians is a strategy for both expressing ambiguity, shame, strangeness, submission to an authority, and avoiding anxiety, conflict and confrontation. (Saunders 1985). Further, studying silence in Finland, Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985: 199) maintain

Communicatively meaningful silence may result from a speaker's intentional switch from the verbal to the nonverbal communication channel: silence can make up a silent speech act and thus becomes the message itself or part of it. In many cases, it can be the silence that contains the most important cues for the meaning of the message. Much can be said by keeping quiet.

A few other studies have examined the role of silence in prose fiction. Dealing with silence in Wiebe's *The Mad Trapper*, Howells (1984: 305) maintains that Wiebe used silence as a means of expressing the artist's

predicament and denoting aggression, defence and refusal. Likewise, Bloch (1986) demonstrates that silence in *The Roman de Silence* embodies refusal of univocal meaning, nourishment of passion, jealousy and a source of limitless fortune. Besides, silence represents images that poets cannot express verbally.

To conclude, those studies have shown that silence has as many meaning as speech. It can be expressive of a variety of meanings ranging from approval, acceptance, thoughtfulness, admiration, and attentiveness to disapproval, refusal, unhappiness, and hostility. If we wish to understand the significance of silence, and if we accept the claim that silence does not always represent the absence or lack of speech, we should research the communicative functions of silence extensively.

The literature reviewed clearly indicates that silence as a component of communication should be further investigated. What is even more deplorable is that studies dealing with this component in prose fiction, poetry and drama seem to be rare. The present article is, therefore, meant to make some contribution to this area. It aims at exploring the uses of silence in John Steinbeck's novel *The Moon is Down*.

This article is significant. The uses or functions of silence in *The Moon is Down* have not, to the best of our knowledge, been examined at all. Accordingly, they ought to be studied if readers of this literary work wish to fully understand the characteristics and personality of the invaders and invadees. Eventually, the townspeople, (the invadees) mostly use silence rather than words as a means of expressing meanings, plans and intentions like refusal, resistance, etc. Thus, for us to appreciate the events or plot of the novel, we should be capable of identifying and comprehending why the conquered people spent most of their time indoors without contacting or talking to others. Any attempt at comprehending and analyzing the acts or deeds of those people may not be thoroughly convincing unless we pay attention not only to their verbal interactions, but also to their silences. Besides, since silence takes place in a given context or setting, the study will try to identify those contexts or settings in which the characters of the novel resort to silence. Finally, this study

will make a good contribution in the sense that it will somehow narrow the gap observed in the research area on silence as a communicative device. It will hopefully demonstrate that silence is not a mere absence of speech, but is an effective means of communication.

Functions of Silence in *The Moon is Down*:

Nowhere in *The Moon is Down* does silence occur to simply indicate a gap or an absence of words, noise, or any other communicative behavior. Rather, it is systematically employed as a paralinguistic communicative device through which thoughts, attitudes and intentions are revealed, albeit, without the use of words. The characters in the novel use silence to express – or hide – their inner thoughts, feelings and reactions in a variety of situations generally corresponding, though not limited, to the findings in the literature reviewed above. On the other hand, when the narrator silences the silence of static scenes and moments (in descriptive passages) with his own words, he is only giving voice to silence, or making silence speak. In both cases-whether it be a behavior effected by the characters in the novel, or a quality or state of existence in static scenes – silence proves to be too purposeful and meaningful to be overlooked by us as readers. And it is with the meanings of silence in our novel that we will be concerned in the following pages of this paper.

Two kinds of silence are presented in *The Moon is Down*. Firstly, there is what we call “silence proper”, by which we mean silence indicated explicitly in the novel through the use of expressions like “there was silence”, or “he/she was silent”, and these permeate the novel throughout. Secondly, we have the silence of purely static scenes and moments to which the narrator gives voice in his descriptive passages. Examples of this latter type of silence which will be dealt with later occur in three major passages in the novel respectively dealing with the drawing-room and wall portraits at the Mayor’s palace (pp. 2-3), the upper floor of the same palace (p. 26) and Molly Morden’s house (p. 77)*.

* All citations from the novel are taken from John Steinbeck, *The Moon is Down*, published and reprinted by Heinemann Educational Books, London, 1983.

Of the numerous functions of silence observed by Tonnen (1985), Saunders (1985) and Nwoye (1985), four major ones of silence proper can be discerned in *The Moon is Down*. These are the positive function of allowing for personal exploration and mutual understanding, the negative function of reflecting disapproval, contempt, and resentment – a function defined by Tannen (1985) as a “failure of language”, the function of reacting to situations characterized by ambiguity, difficulty, strangeness etc., and generating problematic and strong emotions, and, finally, the function of expressing rejection and indicating deferred actions. It should be noted here that this categorization of the functions of silence is a matter of convenience in discussing them, not a matter of technical distinction between them. As in the case of words, it is difficult to make exact distinctions between all the meanings of silence in any extended context. The functions of silence in *The Moon is Down* are not water-tight compartments. They surely overlap and interact with each other and with the other components of the novel’s discourse. Yet, it would be convenient to discuss them one at a time.

The first of the four functions outlined above is a minor one in terms of recurrence, and, therefore, will be taken up first.

Silence as a positive means of communicating consent, agreement and mutual understanding between close and friendly individuals occurs at least once in *The Moon is Down* during the intermittent conversation between Orden and Winter following their arrest by the invaders. Having wondered – in words – what the invaders would do to them next, Orden stopped talking,

And the two men looked at each other for a long time and each one knew what the other one was thinking.

And then Orden continued as though he had been talking. “You know, I couldn’t stop it if I wanted to”. (p. 114)

It is obvious here that the silent looks of the two friends serve as a communicative device by no means poorer than words. Furthermore, silence

serves as a natural continuation of Orden's speech, for when the latter moves from silence to continue speaking, he does so as though he has been talking, that is, with no sense of interruption. Nor does the communication through silence work in one direction – from Orden to Winter. For, when Winter responds to Orden's mixture of silence and words, he goes on with a thought he has been having as if Orden has been reading or hearing his silent thought:

“I know,” said Winter, “but they don't know”.
And he went on with a thought he has been having. ...
(p. 114)

This example attests to the positive function of silence in its capacity as a medium for communicating thoughts and mutual understanding between very close friends.

The negative function of silence as a failure of language reflecting disapproval and contempt appears in the first clear occurrence of silence in the novel: when Mayor Orden first discovers that George Corell has been collaborating with the invaders. At first, Orden's sense of shock and bewilderment render him helplessly speechless:

Orden's mouth hung a little open. He was bewildered.
He looked helplessly from Winter to Corell. (p. 14)

But as he recovers himself, Orden becomes indignant at Corell and uses silence to shower him with contempt and resentment: “He was looking very steadily at Corell and Corell looked belligerently back at him.: (p. 14). Corell's belligerent look shows clearly that he has got the message. Orden's silence has spoken loudly enough. And Orden's refusal to talk with Lanser in Corell's presence (p. 15) can only reiterate the meaning of his silence. Later in the novel, the town as a whole uses silence with exactly the same meaning. Months after the hard facts of the invasion have been driven back to them, the townspeople show resentment and contempt for the traitors by looking silently and coldly at them:

The people of the conquered country settled in a slow, silent, waiting revenge. The men who had been traitors... found... that the people they had known looked at them coldly and never spoke. (p. 62)

In both these examples, silence functions negatively as “a failure of language”. (Tannen 1985). And it goes without saying that the failure here is intentional and purposeful. This latter point becomes self-evident when we consider another example in the novel of the negative function of silence. During a conversation between Captain Loft and his superior Colonel Lanser (p. 105), the latter regrets the fact that his men, “don’t quite know how to act in defeat”. Loft objects to Lanser’s words saying harshly, “What do you mean by defeat? We are not defeated”. Here, Lanser noting Loft’s omission of the word “Sir.”, looks up coldly at him for a long moment without speaking until Loft’s eye wavers and he says, “Sir”. And when Loft complains that Lanser does not demand it (the word “Sir”) of the other soldiers, Lanser replies: “They don’t think about, so it isn’t an insult. When you leave it out, it’s insulting”. This incident exemplifies in two ways the negative functioning of silence as pointed out by Tannen (1985). In the first place, Loft’s omission of “Sir” while addressing his superior is a conscious way of showing disapproval and disrespect. Secondly, Lanser’s silent demand of “Sir”, expressed in his cold worldless look at Loft, conveys his disapproval and resentment of the latter’s audacity and impudence.

The clearest example of silence as a failure of language capable of estranging “the other” is observed in Tonder’s complaint that the town’s women “are frozen” (p. 69), and in his desperate need for talking with Molly (pp. 80-81). Here, Tonder’s desire for women is transcended into a desire for words, just as his crushing fear of total estrangement is inflicted by the women’s silence, or intentional failure of language. The interaction between silence and estrangement in this context is the other side of the coin – the first side being the interaction between language and desire. As R. Howard Bloch

(1986: 94) puts it, "Desire alienates language which, alienated, becomes an even greater source of desire and the desire for language".

The third major function of silence in *The Moon is Down* is that of serving as a strategy for the expression of problematic and strong emotions generated in situations of ambiguity and potential difficulty. This function is evident in Mayor Orden's recurring use of silence as a way of reacting to situations involving ambiguity and difficulty. Such is the case when, during his first meeting with Lanser, Orden is presented with the problematic request to cooperate with the invaders "for the good of all". (p. 20). The ambiguity of the situation lies in the notion that it is unclear to Orden whether cooperating with the town's enemy would save his people's lives and spare them suffering (as Lanser implies), or it would be an act of treason that would anger his people and win him their resentment. Orden simply cannot tell. Thus, his first reaction is to make no reply. And when Lanser repeats his request demanding an answer, Orden can only explain his own silence with "I don't know..." (p. 20). Again, in response to Lanser's implicit threat and warning against Orden's failure to cooperate, "Mayor Orden was silent." (p. 21).

A similar situation occurs when Lanser comes again to Orden and asks apologetically for the latter's cooperation, this time in condemning Alex Morden for having killed Captain Bentick. Lanser asks Orden to pass the death sentence on Alex. To Lanser's apologetic request Orden's reply is silence:

Orden did not answer. He looked straight into
Lanser's eyes. ...

Between sentences Lanser waited for an answer,
but he received none. (p. 52)

Silence also occurs in the novel as a means of expressing strong emotions at times of deep sorrow and sadness-this being one of the functions of silence observed in Nwoye's (1985) study of the Igbo in Nigeria. Such is the case during the heavy moments between Alex's condemnation to death and his execution. (p. 60). As the guard takes Alex out of the room and the firing squad

march behind him, silence prevails: "The men about the table were silent". (p. 60). And while waiting for the crash of firing that would announce the execution of Alex, the men in the room can only sit in silence: "Silence fell on the room and each man listened". (p. 60). Silence is also used to express deep sorrow and human sympathy when the Anders boys come secretly at night to meet Orden and Winter at Molly's home. These boys and Molly are all bereaved of dear ones: the Anders boys have lost a brother and Molly has lost her husband. Also, when Molly condoles the two boys for the loss of their brother, it is with silence that they express their strong sympathy with her and their deep regret for not having condoled her before: "The two were silent and they looked embarrassed". (p.88).

Within the context of this major function, there remains one more use of silence in *The Moon is Down*, namely, that of expressing unhappy submission to, and reflecting anger and hostility toward, an imposed authority. This use of silence is quite evident in the novel's persistent foregrounding of the sullenness in the people's behavior following the arrest of Alex Morden by the invaders and, later, immediately before the trial. After Alex's arrest, the people move "sullenly through the streets.."; the working men in the coal shaft push the coal cars "sullenly"; the tradesmen serve the people, but no one speaks with them; and the people themselves speak to one another "in monosyllables". (p.43). And again, on the day of Alex's trial, there hangs over the town "a sullenness and a dry growing hatred"; the eyes are "cold and sullen" on the patrol walking down the streets; and in the shops people ask for goods and pay for it without exchanging good-day with the seller. (p.55).

The fourth and last major function of silence proper to be considered in this study is that of indicating deferred action. In its capacity as an indicator of deferred action, the townspeople's silence in *The Moon is Down* seems to have been understood, and thus feared, by Colonel Lanser, the experienced leader of the invaders. Responding to Captain Loft's objection to allowing Orden to voice his resentment of the invaders at the end of Alex's trial, Lanser says to Loft, "Hush! Is it better to hear it, or would you rather it were whispered?"

(p.58). Here Lanser shows that he knows better than the foolhardy Loft. He realizes that orden's silence – and likewise the town's – can be much more dangerous than words. He sees the silence of these conquered people to be more worrying and threatening than their words. In other words, the unsaid scares the invaders more than that which is said – and rightly so, since the unsaid, i.e., silence, indicates but does not reveal deferred actions of resistance and revenge.

This sense of grave danger to the invaders lurking behind the town's silence is reiterated on several occasions in the course of the novel. The town's resistance is portrayed primarily in terms of silence as a weapon – effective, destructive and nerve breaking to the enemy soldiers. As resistance picks up slowly, silently, but steadily, the staff of the invaders begin to break down under the pressure of the town's cold, silent, sullen and waiting hatred:

Now it was that the conqueror was surrounded, the men of the battalion alone among silent enemies, and no man might relax his guard. (p. 63).

A little fear begins to grow in the conquerors. The persistent cold sullen silence of the conquered inhibits the conquerors and puts them under a "terrible spiritual siege" (pp.64-65). This silence proves to be far more threatening and destructive to the invaders than any noise explosives, guns, or bombs. It is this cold silence that drives Lieutenant Tonder crazy and makes the occupied town for him a " 'god-forsaken hole!' " (p.68). Tonder finds the townspeople horrible not because they use deadly weapons or thwart the plans of the invaders with actions of words, but because they are capable of silence: " 'They never speak. They answer like dead men. They obey, these horrible people.' " (p.69).

The effectiveness of silence as a weapon against the invaders is further emphasized and highlighted by the narrator as he attributes silence not only to people, but also to inanimate objects. The little parachutes dropped for the people from the British bombers are described as opening and drifting the small packages of dynamite "silently and slowly" downward toward the earth. (p.97).

Nor is noisy dynamite the weapon most deadly for the invaders or most – feared by them. Rather, it is poison – silent poison, secret poison – that they anticipate and regard with the greatest anxiety and apprehension. Lanser’s words to his officers reveal this anxiety:

'Can you think what will happen to the morale of our men or even to you if the people had some of those little game darts, you know, those silly little things you throw at a target, the points coated perhaps with cyanide, silent, deadly little things that you couldn't hear coming, that would pierce the uniform and make no noise?' (p. 104).

These occurrences of silence exemplify clearly the function of silence as an effective means of self-defense and as an indicator of deferred action. This function of silence proper proves to be of utmost significance in our novel because it illuminates the novel’s central theme, namely, the dogged struggle of a silent, slow and simple town against its noisy, time-minded and sophisticated enemy.

Now we come to the second type of silence presented in *The Moon is Down*, that is, the silence of purely static scenes and moments. This type of silence is treated by the narrator in the only way possible: by breaking the silence with words in the form of descriptive passages. Through the use of words to describe a static scene, the narrator attempts to capture the hidden essence of silence in the scene and, in so doing, suggest an interpretation of it. The descriptive passages kill silence by making it speak. And since, to borrow from Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*, “nothing so completely verifies our perception of a thing as our killing of it” (cited in Howells 1984:308), these passages are treated here as valid instances of silence.

One such descriptive passage affords us a portrayal of the static scene inside Mayor Orden’s drawing-room just after the invaders have gained control of the town and handed in a formal request that the Mayor grant an audience to Colonel Lanser. (pp.2-3). In this passage, the room is portrayed in positive

terms: it is “very sweet and comfortable”; its wall-paper is “dark red with gold figures”; and the wood work is “white, pretty, and clean”. Moreover, the furniture in the room is rather humanized: the chairs are “set about stiffly like... servants”; the coal-scuttle “stands” on the hearth; and the curly porcelain clock “stands” on the mantle swarming with tumbling cherubs and flanked “by – not with – vases. Finally, the paintings on the wall are “largely preoccupied with the heroism of large dogs faced with imperilled children”.

Through this description in words, the silence of the static scene inside the room is broken and given voice in the most effective way. The theme comes to embody the major thematic contrasts and conflicts in the novel as a whole. The sweetness and comfort in the room stand in direct contrast with the ugliness of the invasion and with what the invaders would later make of the upper floor right above this drawing-room- “rather an uncomfortable club”. (p.26). The warmth issuing from the hearth’s red, though flameless, heat and the homely warmth of the dark red wall-paper are to be contrasted with the cold time-mindedness and calculating shrewdness of the invaders (hinted at by the very mentioning of the clock), and with the cold hatred inherent in invasion and war. The red, though flameless, heat symbolizes the door’s dormant resistance awaiting to be kindled into flame. The humanized chairs, coal-scuttle, and fat vases, that exist to give warmth to people and beautify the palace, contrast with the hardly human invaders who come to oppress and destroy. The tumbling cherubs – timeless heavenly creatures of spontaneous and disinterested love and grace – inevitably help draw a picture of the invaders as calculating, time-minded and violent devils. Finally, the paintings on the wall draw an inevitable parallel between the “amazing” heroism of large dogs faced with imperilled children and the mock-heroic invaders faced with these peaceful townspeople.

Another passage dealing with a purely static scene is the one that describes the invaders’ headquarters on the upper floor of the Mayor’s palace (p.26). Again, the silence of the scene is broken by the narrator and made to highlight the major conflict in the novel – the conflict between the conquerors and the conquered in the terms of what each of the two parties stands for. The

club the invaders have made above the Mayor's little drawing-room on the ground floor is "rather an uncomfortable club", and thus stands in direct contrast with the "sweet and comfortable" drawing-room below it. The two rooms stand for two opposite ways of life and two contrasting types of people. The pastoral pictures of cows, lakes and little farmhouses on the walls of this room reflect the Mayor's – and the town's – calm, simple and natural way of life. This way of life is in direct contrast with that of the invaders, who come to disrupt and upset the calmness and simplicity of life in the town. The invaders are not interested in the beauty and simplicity of these pictures hung on the walls between the windows; they look from these windows "down over the town..., to the docks where the shipping was tied up, to the docks where coal barges pulled up and took their loads and went out to sea". (p.26). They are interested in the coal and fish, not in the people or the land.

A third instance of the breaking of silence in a static scene occurs when the narrator describes the interior of Molly's house (p.77). In this description, the house is carefully portrayed as a typical one in the town: it is "shaped like the others" and wears its snow cap "like the others". In other words, it stands for all the houses in the town. The warmth of the living-room and the comfort it affords are emphasized: "It was a warm, poor, comfortable room..." The walls are papered in warm brown, and the light in the room is warm and soft. Yet we can hardly miss the sadness and resignation of the occupant of the room, who sits alone silently "unravelling the wall from an old blue sweater and winding the yarn on a ball". For one thing, Molly's unravelling of wool from an old sweater testifies extreme poverty to her. For another it takes us back to the tragic execution of her husband by the invaders, which must have been for her a kind of unravelling of the entire life and past happiness. Moreover, the two pictures on the back wall - one of fish and one of grouse, all lying dead – suggest silently that the death of her husband has left its stamp on Molly's life. But this is only part of the truth. For, despite the loss of her husband and her temporary loss of freedom, there remains in Molly's house – and by implication in her heart and mind – warmth, relative comfort and softness. The

pictures of dead fish and grouse are counterbalanced by a picture of Christ “walking on the waves towards the despairing fishermen”. There is hope for her yet, and miracles are still thinkable. It remains necessary to note that in its capacity to provide warmth, comfort and relaxation for its occupant, Molly’s silent and sad house contrasts with the street outside, where, as they walked, the patrol “talked of things they longed for... and sometimes they talked of their hatred of what they were doing and of their loneliness”. (pp.76-77). Molly is silent. She is alone. She is sad. But, unlike the soldiers outside, she does not necessarily feel lonely, nervous, uncomfortable, or self-hating. In short, Molly can sit silently alone in a silent home, while the soldiers can hardly walk without talking, and their talking can hardly soothe their hearts or minds. Here lies the significance of this passage both for this study of silence and for the central theme of our novel. On the one hand, the silent interior of Molly’s house and her own silence are given voice and made to speak loudly to us as readers. On the other hand, the contrast between the hopeful silence of the town and its people (represented by Molly and her house) and the desperate and bitter talking of the invaders (represented by the patrol in the street) is at the heart of the novel’s central theme.

Conclusion:

The foregoing presentation has examined silence in Steinbeck’s *The Moon is Down*. We have shown that silence expresses a variety of communicative functions dealt with under two categories: silence proper and silence of purely static scenes and moments. These categories fulfill positive and negative functions including personal exploration, mutual understuding, meditation, resentment, refusal, disapproval, contempt and embarrassment. In the context of Saville – Troike’s (1985) taxonomy of silence types and functions, the uses of silence in the novel are institutionally – determined, interactive, noninteractive and linguistic. An instance of the institutionally – determined silence is the attitude of the less powerful, poor democratic townspeople toward the powerful conquerers. An instance of the interactive

silence is the rejection, sorrow, disapproval and carelessness experienced by the conquered people depicted in the novel. Finally, meditation or serious thoughtfulness implicitly and explicitly indicated in the acts or plans of both the invaders and invadees supplies an example of the noninteractive silence.

In the final analysis, it is evident that silence plays a significant role in *The Moon is Down*, and, for us to comprehend and appreciate the jest of the novel, we should give due account not only to the words and sounds of the narrator and other characters, but also to those meanings which are not being said; that is, we should seriously and thoroughly consider meanings expressed via silence.

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