

The Silent Treatment: Real and Perceived Absence of Thought on the Page

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There is an audible power in silence. Real and perceived absence of words on a page sharpens readers' senses in a near mystical way. Perceived absence of thought is considered subtext. Real absence of thought is the extreme form of subtext; what is said when absolutely nothing is present, a story stripped to its barest essentials. Such austere fiction is rare, for it requires the writer to know her story from the inside out, and to write it so clearly that her restraint grows like a tree promising to bear fruit in words which are not there where one expects them to be, words found only in the subconscious mind of the reader. More often than not, a great writer uses both real and perceived absences of thought in her fiction. "Nothing ever is what it seems," Robert McKee submits in his craft book, *Story* (253). "The storyteller gives [readers] the pleasure that life denies [...] the dark ritual of story, looking through the face of life to the heart of what is felt and thought beneath what is said and done" (254). McKee is alluding to writing through the character: every image, verb, and movement transmitting the yearning of the character moment by moment in a sensual reading experience. Indeed, these are the smaller building blocks, the molecules, of a story. But yearning must also be brought to the silent spaces in between, the near-invisible atoms of fiction. This technique is easier to accomplish in cinema where the audience sees the silence, often accompanied by the soundtrack to extract mood. In fiction, readers must imagine the silence, let it fill them up as words do and build bridges of meaning from what is and is not present on the page.

Certainly silence, particularly in adult fiction, can indicate a writer's discourse on what cannot be named culturally or historically, such as with apophatic discourse. It can also indicate a writer or character's nihilistic personality, for example. These purposes for silence (denials of

existence, the unnamable) are not analyzed in this essay because they are complex beliefs rarely broached in children's fiction. Rather, this is a discussion one step beyond the details of the moment-to-moment reading experience: what meaning is present in both real and perceived absence of thought on a page. How silence can be extracted from a word, its placement, punctuation, figurative language, and dialogue; and how, ultimately, the silent treatment, like a tree in harvest, bears rich fruits long enjoyed by the reader. Poets Mary Oliver and Issa, and authors Carolyn Coman, An Na, Rita Williams-Garcia, and Jacqueline Woodson will be referenced as examples.

The Alphabet: Why a Rock Is Not a Stone

Pulitzer-prize winning poet, Mary Oliver, in her craft book, *A Poetry Handbook*, analyzes poems in terms of letter sounds, placement of words, punctuation, patterns of detail, and figurative language, among other components. Although she speaks for poetry, her rules also apply to understanding the art of provoking silence on the literary page. "To make a poem, we must make sounds," Oliver begins (19). "Not random sounds, but chosen sounds" (19). The same should be said for literature. How often do writers (particularly novelists) *really* look at the individual sounds that comprise each letter in a word and then contemplate how they come together to contribute to the reading experience? There is much to be learned about the correlation between the meaning, connotation, and actual sound of a word. Oliver states: "A 'rock' is not a 'stone,' [...] But, why is a rock not a stone?" (19). Why does the word "rock" sound *louder* than the word "stone"? The answer lies within the individual sounds of the vowels and consonants. *Rock* has a short vowel; *stone* has a long. *Stone* has a soft semivowel and mute consonant at the beginning that are softened by the long o vowel, while *rock* begins with a soft

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