

World Literature Assignment 2

A Commentary on Pages 170-171 on *Silence*



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Silence was an empathetic novel, which realistically, if not harshly, portrayed the reality of Japanese Christians living in Japan during the Tokugawa era. Shusaku Endo, the author, was raised mostly in a Catholic home. Because of his religion, Endo was consequently ostracized by his peers. Even when he moved to France, Endo was isolated as a foreigner. It was within this ruthless reality of his status as a Japanese Christian in which Endo's faith developed and clearly portrayed in *Silence*. In a sublime, climactic moment of sacrifice, courage, and love (pages 170-171), Shusaku Endo reveals his message on Christianity. Incorporating powerful allusions, metaphors, and character development, Endo brings the novel to an affecting climax through the development of two characters, Sebastiao Rodriguez and Christovao Ferreira.

Sebastiao Rodriguez is a young Jesuit priest from Portugal. He first enters the scenes in hopes of finding Christovao Ferreira, a pioneering priest who was known to have apostatized in Japan. Rodriguez is a priest because of his love for God and epitomizes an ardent, true believer. Jesus' "face is deeply ingrained in [his] soul." (Endo 171) and often refers to Christ's face as the most beautiful in the world. Ironically, however, it is exactly this love which becomes a hindrance in Rodriguez' mission to salvage the Japanese disciples.

In this particular scene, Rodriguez is persuaded to finally step on the *fumie* after having been incarcerated, interrogated, and tortured into renouncing his faith. Rodriguez had previously refused to step on the *fumie*, a representation of God, because of his faith in God. However, because Rodriguez is crushed at the thought of betraying God in any way, Rodriguez is imprisoned in the dogged belief that stepping on the *fumie* would be equivalent to denying God. Rodriguez, struggling between his faith and his guilt and compassion towards the Japanese Christians being tortured, then apostatizes. This act is extremely symbolic, bringing the emotional storm and the conflict to an end.

This scene represented the final battle between conflicting views on apostasy. Rodriguez weighed renouncing his own faith while Ferreira voiced the counterarguments against its evil. This development between two arguments can also be alluded to the temptation of Christ in the Bible in which Jesus was tempted by the devil for forty days before making a decision based on faith in God

as Rodriguez struggled to make a decision based on God's will.

Rodriguez stepping on the *fumie* represented his apostasy. Apostasy is denounced by the Church as an act of betrayal towards God as described by Ferreira in page 170. In fact, it is precisely this concept that Rodriguez had come to Nagasaki. A major theme in the novel, the emotional and mental conflicts about apostasy is explored in the two pages. While apostasy is generally seen throughout the novel as an action to be condemned, apostasy is Rodriguez' ultimate sacrifice in this context. Rodriguez treasured his Christian faith the most. However, for the Japanese Christians being tortured because of Rodriguez' refusal to apostatize, Rodriguez gave up his Christianity. In this way, Rodriguez reflects God, who gave up his only son in order to save the lives of millions. Both acts were done out of love and compassion. Through Rodriguez' denouncement of his priesthood, he had, as Ferreira states, "perform[ed] the most painful act of love that has ever been performed." (Endo 170) Just as the cross holds no significance for those who do not believe, the *act* of apostasy is obscured as the value behind the act is investigated. Through this, Endo buries the black and white of the situation at hand, rather leaving it up to the readers to decide whether the act or the thought behind the act weighs more heavily.

Christovao Ferreira is Rodriguez' purpose in coming to Japan. Ferreira was highly esteemed as a model Christian. Compassionate about humanity, Ferreira had become a priest because of such sympathy. However, Ferreira, initially lauded for his invulnerable, stalwart faith, has at this point, apostatized, residing in Japan out of devastated guilt and works as the medium in communicating Rodriguez' unvoiced conflicts as well as acting as a mentor during Rodriguez' imprisonment. "...Even now, after his apostasy, Ferreira had not been able to escape from the old psychological orientation that had motivated Ferreira seemed to be relying on his old dream of helping others like a crazy woman who offers her breast to a baby." (Endo 144) A phantom of compassion and decorative words is all that is left of Ferreira's passion during this excerpt.

Ferreira is Rodriguez' foil and is used to emphasize upon the true value of Christianity. Primarily, the two characters are similar. Both Ferreira and Rodriguez are passionate believers,

embracing God and earnestly setting out to help humanity. And both succumb to apostasy. However, these two characters meet completely diverging fates despite parallel circumstances. The once perfect, esteemed model of a Christian, Ferreira becomes a miserable, unfulfilled man desperately seeking haven in delusional necessity, a slave to guilt and regret. The other, a young, naïve Rodriguez, is consummated by his apostasy rather than “broken,” as Ferreira described. It is through Ferreira that Endo questions the readers about their own faiths as he places both characters emerging conversely in comparable circumstances. In the end, Endo places the decisive difference between the two men on the extent of their trust in God’s mercy and grace, and the extent of their beliefs.

Ferreira wallows in the fact that he had abandoned God when there was no evidence God had abandoned him. Ferreira had believed in the image of God, but did not take into account God Himself. Rodriguez suffered as well as he stated that “...The most beautiful, the most precious thing in the world had been living in my heart. And now with this foot I am going trample on it.” (Endo 171) This moment of complete despair is emphasized with the repetitive word, “trample,” appealing to the reader’s entire senses as they are able to sympathize with the character as he tramples upon ‘Jesus.’ However, “the first rays of the dawn appear[ed].” (Endo 171)

‘Dawn,’ which is often used to exemplify a new beginning or hope, harbingers the coming of something positive from a negative act. There was hope even after the greatest sacrifice as Rodriguez listens for God’s voice which says, “It was to share men’s pain that I carried my cross.” (Endo 171) In what could have been a tragic event of a disciple giving up his everything, this scene, instead, displayed a brilliant scene of God’s love. This glorious moment of hope and renewal was symbolized by the rising sun and the crowing cock.

The crowing rooster also embodied the Japanese culture, in which roosters are constantly used to symbolize morning and the dispersion of evil. Not only that, the cock was to have crew three times, symbolizing the holy number three in allusion to the Bible. Peter, in the Bible denied Jesus three times while a rooster crew in the background. This symbolic “three” had previously been used to

describe the “interpreter and two guards, looking just like three black dolls,” (Endo 170) which foreshadowed a coming sense of doom as the ominous color, “black” and the inhumanity of “dolls” are used to describe the “antagonists” of the situation. The reoccurring number three in the Bible and this certain passage brought an element of sanctity to the text. Through this love, Rodriguez came to terms with himself and listened to what Ferreira had called God’s “silence.”

Throughout the novel, Shusaku Endo reveals himself through the dilemmas that Rodriguez and Ferreira are faced with. As a struggling Christian himself during the time he wrote the book, Endo queried about matters that probably he himself wrestled with. This allowed space for personal reflection and allowed intimacy with the readers as Endo exposed his own humanity in the doubts and questions. Through the individual aspects of the different characters: guilt, cowardice, fear, love, and salvation, Endo was able to fully define his definition and views on Christianity and believers. Clear, distinct characterization and dialogue also showed Endo’s personal insights as well as he communicated very real queries to the readers which were worth contemplating over. This portion of book exposed Endo’s apex of the Christian faith through Rodriguez’s apostasy and God’s ultimate forgiveness of the greatest sin of turning ones back towards God.

“It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share men’s pain that I carried my cross.” (Endo 171) These were God’s words to Rodriguez as he committed himself to apostasy. Ultimately, this passage, through purposeful, straightforward literary devices and character development, served as the final disclosure of Endo’s theme: It is the value behind the action that matters, not the action itself. As seen through God’s words in this scene of betrayal and faith, God had never been silent. In truth, “[He] was not silent. [He] suffered beside [them].” (Endo 190)

Bibliography:

Endo, Shusaku. *Silence*. New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1980. Print.