

## PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACH TO SILENCE IN *A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS*

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**Abstract:** Generally considered as the absence of speech, silence is a phenomenon which invites itself in human interactions as a factor that plays multiple functions and offers diverse interpretations. In *A Man for All Seasons*, Thomas More, the tragic hero, opts for silence before the court, the very moment his talents as a lawyer are direly needed. Because little attention has been given to the meaning of silence in the play, this paper uses psychoanalytic theory to discuss ways in which silence can be conceived and interpreted. It contributes to gain insight into the attitude and motivation behind Thomas More's silence in order to show the bias in the latter's martyrdom. Specifically, the paper shows that Thomas More's silence is symptomatic of: (1) his lack of a unified personality, (2) the presence of moral and religious constraints, (3) a strategic silence to embarrass the court, (4) a contemplative silence used to justify the motives of his conscience, (5) resignation and despair when he realizes that he is eligible for death sentence. The paper holds that Thomas More's silence during his trial speaks more laudably about his personality than his words.

**Keywords:** silence, interpretation, psychoanalytic theory, martyrdom

### APPROCHE PSYCHANALYTIQUE DU SILENCE DANS *A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS*

**Résumé :** Généralement considéré comme l'absence de parole, le silence est un phénomène qui s'invite dans les interactions humaines comme un facteur qui joue de multiples fonctions et offre des interprétations diverses. Dans *A Man for All Seasons*, Thomas More, le héros tragique, opte pour le silence devant le tribunal, au moment même où ses talents d'avocat sont cruellement requis. Parce que peu d'attention a été accordée à la signification du silence dans la pièce, cet article utilise la théorie psychanalytique pour discuter des façons dont le silence peut être conçu et interprété. Il contribue à mieux comprendre l'attitude et la motivation derrière le silence de Thomas More afin de montrer le parti pris du martyr de ce dernier. Plus précisément, l'article montre que le silence de Thomas More est symptomatique de : (1) son manque de personnalité unifiée, (2) la présence de contraintes morales et religieuses, (3) un silence stratégique pour embarrasser le tribunal, (4) un silence contemplatif utilisé pour justifier les motifs de sa conscience, (5) la résignation et du désespoir lorsqu'il réalise qu'il peut être condamné à mort. L'article soutient que le silence de Thomas More pendant son procès est plus élogieux sur sa personnalité que ses paroles.

**Mots-clés :** silence, interprétation, théorie psychanalytique, martyre

### Introduction

Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Season* is about the story of king Henry VIII. The latter is in search of an heir to lead the kingdom after his reign. The fulfillment of the king's wish fails to become true with his wife Catherine who, so far, has given birth to girls only. Being a man of Church, the king finds himself limited by religious laws as to

divorce or polygamy. To solve that equation, the king has to do away with the command of the Pope whose voice counts in crucial decisions like divorce in the Church. The most probable solution to the challenge is that the king becomes the Head of the Church in England, which requires a parliamentary Act of Supremacy. Next to that, an Act is issued whereby every citizen should take an oath recognizing the king to have supremacy over the Church and can secure the divorce for himself. The great majority of the citizens adhere to the project except few dissidents among church leaders and one famous political leader by the name of Thomas More. A case is then brought against More's refusal to publicly recognize the king's supremacy over the Church. It is during the judgement of that case that More, who is a professional and an experienced lawyer, Lord Chancellor in the kingdom, decides, at the crucial moment he is offered the opportunity to defend himself, to keep silent on charges brought against him. In *A Man for All Season*, "although some might see silence as 'nothingness' and while it is an understudied phenomenon, silence is actually a rich, fascinating and important subject that deserves academic study" (Meyer, 2016, p321). Much attention has not been given to the study of silence because "in the academy, we value speech as it demonstrates one's ability to express ideas, theorize in the public space and demonstrate one's knowledge" (Rodriguez, 2011, p111). Public speaking is then known to be an art which people need to learn in order fit in with the world which has become extremely noisy (Sarah, 2017).

However, generally considered as the absence of speech, silence is a phenomenon which invites itself in human interactions as a factor that plays multiples functions and offers diverse interpretations. It is noted that "Silence is, in fact, a polysemic notion, and there are cultural, political and architectural differences between these different kinds of silence" (Meyer, 2016, p322). In a sense, "the manner in which silence is used is contextual and reflective of particular communities and cultures" (Rodriguez, 2011, p112). As such, knowledge about silence and what it might betoken can also be debated outside of academic sphere.

Thus, within academic debate, this paper uses psychoanalytic theory to discuss ways in which silence can be conceived and interpreted in *A Man for All Season*. It contributes to gain insight into the attitude and motivation behind Thomas More's silence in order to show the bias in the latter's martyrdom. Specifically, the paper shows that Thomas More's silence is symptomatic of: (1) his lack of a unified personality, (2) the presence of moral and religious constraints, (3) a strategic silence to embarrass the court, (4) a contemplative silence used to justify the motives of his conscience, (5) resignation and despair when he realizes that he is eligible for death sentence. The paper holds that Thomas More's silence during his trial speaks more laudably about his personality than his words.

## 1. Psychoanalytic Theoretical Approach

Psychoanalysis which is used as a theoretical approach in this paper draws heavily on the writings of the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). It explores reasons which explain unspoken or unuttered words of Thomas More when opportunity is offered for their utterances. In *A Man for All Seasons*, psychoanalysis investigates drives that sustain More's silence before the court as it suspects such silence to have something to do with the battle between the Ego and Superego that Sigmund Freud established as functionalities of human brain (Chowers, 2002; Selden et al., 2005; Zuhair, Herzog, 2016, 2020). For Sigmund Freud, "psychoanalysis was, at once, a therapeutic modality, a theory of human nature, and a toolbox for cultural criticism" (Herzog, 2016, p2). It has made an impact in thought-systems during twentieth century in social sciences as well as in art and literature (Herzog, 2016). Its

use in literary criticism offered rooms for discussions on topics which have remained unexplored in works of art since then. According to Selden et al. (2005, p153), “It starts with Sigmund Freud’s analysis of the literary work as a symptom of the artist, where the relationship between author and text is analogous to dreamers and their ‘text’ (literature = ‘fantasy’)”.

In Robert Bolt’s play, many reasons can explain why Thomas More remains silent in certain circumstances or keeps permanently quiet when it comes to talk about specific issues. It is noted, for instance, that when power is used abusively against an individual, and “when it is impossible for the victim to process or put words to what is, or was, happening, then silence, on the part of the victim, may be the result as a response to overwhelming experience” (Knutson & Kristiansen, 2015, p10). This can be alluded to a traumatic state whereby the victim struggles to bear the pain caused by an emotional as well as a physical injury. In a sense, “When trauma is too great to be dealt with openly and directly, then silence is often the best way to cope with the overwhelming emotions that ensue” (Knutson & Kristiansen, 2015, p13). Brought into creative writing, silence has been used as an appropriate response by characters or actors challenging contexts, though it might be more destructive or tragic as it is the case of Thomas More. Such characters are linguistically limited as they fail to find words to describe or name their experience. Applied to fiction, Freudian psychoanalysis “examines how the mind reacts to human failure and probes the unconscious motives that prompt characters to be careless, miserable, disappointed, depressed and mad” (Zuhair, 2020, p52). In the context of *A Man for All Seasons*, it helps understand the mechanisms underlying Thomas More’s surprise, shock and indignation when he hears that he is demonized as traitor: “that you did conspire traitorously and maliciously to deny and deprive our liege lord Henry of his undoubted certain title, Supreme Head of the Church in England” (Bolt, 1990, p150).

## 2. Silence: Related Literature

Literature on silence has gained more attention in recent years as the propensity to keep silent is no more accepted in a 21<sup>st</sup> century dominated by noise and speech. Public speaking specialists brought the great majority of people to believe that speaking is the only available option for them to not only defend and protect themselves but also to win respect and professions. However, silence is known to be a form of communication as can be read in the following passage:

Silence can be voluntary and self-imposed, or it can be the result of external pressures and constraints; silence can be expressive, or it can be empty, unreadable; silence can be temporary, situational, or it can represent a consistent, even pathological pattern; silence can signify withdrawal from a conversation, or it can be an indicator of attentive, thoughtful listening.

Woolley (2012, p.271)

From the passage above, it can be inferred that silence is a social phenomenon that bears interpretations within contexts. Lee Anthony (2009, p14) observed, in this respect, that “silence is not merely the absence of sound” but rather a social fact that is sensed and felt by those who recognize its presence and give attention and sensibility to it. In a sense, silence is an integral part of human interactions and plays an active role (Nikolić, 2016). And as a social phenomenon, it is sometimes subject to cultural interpretations (Knutson & Kristiansen, 2015). As such, silence gives appropriate meaning when agents involved in its interpretation are mindful of its context and

cultural stand. In *Silence and Absence in Literature and Music*, Wolf & Walter (2016, pvii) laid emphasis on the culturally mediated role played by silence regardless its mode of expression: “silence of meditation in churches or private prayer, a minute of silence dedicated to a deceased person, or the surprising impression of absence when expected events do not occur”. Thus, within its mode of expression, Margulis Elizabeth Hellmuth (2007, p245) explored five functions of silence namely “silence as boundary, silence as interruption, silence as a revealer of the inner ear, silence as a promoter of meta-listening, and silence as a communicator”.

Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger (2010, p1104) introduced the notion of “overt and covert silences” and underscored that the absence of narrative or speech may be a drive behind overt silence whereas covert silence is synonymous with the absence of content. Such absence of content is what Van der Heide (1961), as quoted by Knutson & Kristiansen (2015, p17), terms as “blank silence” when he argued that silence in an analytic setting can occasionally manifest itself as both empty and without contextual reference (Chavarot, 2021). Unlike a blank silence which can be expressed by a dead body, a moment of silence which is very often experienced during ceremonies devoted to human tragedies in particular, does bear a message or speech. Its role, according to Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger (2010, p1108) is to allow “introspection and reflection”. Such kind of silence is called upon to establish meditative conditions. It can also be said that it represents the language of the dead whose physical absence is synonymous with silence. In education, silence is used as pedagogic tool to create a teaching and learning atmosphere. The silence required from learners offers a gap which the teacher fills with a speech (Rodriguez, 2011; Li Li, 2004). If silence is required from both sides (the teacher and the learner), it can still offer a room for reflection on a topic or a number of topics. In teaching and learning, such a pedagogic silence is most of the time needed because “when external stimuli are withdrawn, internal projections, imaginings, constructions, and assumptions emerge more recognizably” (Margulis, 2007, p255). Acquiescent silence, according to Whiteside & Barclay (2013, p256), “is a behavioral indication that one's needs for control and meaningful existence are not being fulfilled”. In a sense, it is silence which asks for recognition and speech. Acquiescent silence is expressed when the object standing between it and the desired end is more powerful. It is an intentional silence, the aim of which goes beyond what Li Li Huey (2004) called a project of facilitating introspection and self-discipline. Though such silence requires self-discipline in order not to break under the weight of a lack of speech, it is used as a means of communication to draw attention and call for help and support in dealing with the challenge it faces. In addition, other manifestations of silence include deaf and body silence (Bamberg, 2004). Deaf silence refers to the silence of the deaf and dumb as perceived by those who hear and can speak. For the latter, deaf and dumb people have a heavier burden in term of coping with their silent moment. This opinion is, however, challenged by a deaf and dumb woman when she is asked to know if her silence can be compared to that of a cave or aquatic setting:

A cave? It's not silent, for me, a cave! It's full of smells, humidity, noisy sensations, a cave. Under water? I am at home underwater. I am an underwater gull, which loves to dive. I am a surface gull that loves the sun and the sea. I am like you, underwater. My silence is not your silence. My silence would be more like having my eyes closed, my hands paralysed, my body insensitive, my skin inert. A silence of the body.

Bamberg (2004, p.691)

In a sense, what might be interpreted as empty silence when referring to the deaf and dumb is not what the latter feels about it. When their bodies do not respond to stimuli through their senses, they can really feel a blank silence whereby no content is provided. Last but not least is collective silence which is practised to achieve forgetfulness. According to Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger (2010, p1116), this type of silence intends to save a nation or community from a past that contains “embarrassing moments, human right violations, shameful events and little to be proud of”. This silence is to a nation what trauma can be to an individual. However, when collective silence overlooks acquiescent silence, its surface function needs to be challenged. Thus, the silence of the minority in the context of collective silence can be either an act of resistance or the lack of words to express their oppression because “When victims attempt to describe this enormous pain in words, the effort pushes them to the limits of language: words are inadequate to describe their suffering” (Knutson & Kristiansen, 2015, p13). As such, silence, on the surface, “conveys a kind of vulnerability and desire for protection” (DiAngelo, 2016, p293). Thus, collective silence which does not protect the vulnerable cannot be equated with a “manifestation of tolerance” (Shcherbyna & Shashkova, 2019, p76). It is, rather, a weapon through which certain privileges are protected and preserved at the expense of the silent powerless minority. In his attempt to be honest and just, Thomas More’s silence can navigate through all the above-mentioned forms of silence. He can also be considered as a representative of a minority voice in the midst of a vast majority of corrupt and selfish leaders in *A Man for All Seasons*.

### 3. Thomas More’s Silence in *A Man for All Seasons*

Thomas More’s conscience and the demands of his political responsibility do not help him to achieve a unified personality. It means his repressed inner self plays against his personality. Silence can, then, relate to the battle between the ego and superego since “the figure of the alien, or Other, proves to be the projection of a repressed inner self and unsettles notions of a unified personality” (Selden et al., 2005, p155). In addition, Thomas More is more discouraged when he realizes that some of his fellow churchmen have joined the advocators of the divorce in order to enjoy certain privileges connected to politics. It can then be said that he abstains from arguing and evaluating allegations brought against him because of “moral constraints in the situation” (Whiteside & Barclay, 2013, p251). Because of that constraint, he deems it good to keep silent in order to prevent misinterpretations of his statements (DiAngelo, 2016, p292). It is also possible that the corrupt attitude of his fellow religious leaders during his imprisonment and trial has contributed to More’s silence. In *Towards a Theory of Silence as a Political Strategy*, Professor Barry Brummett from Purdue University, as quoted by Rappaport, argues that “silence is strategic when that silence (a) violates expectations; (b) draws public attribution of fairly predictable meanings; and (c) seems intentional and directed at an audience” (Rappaport, 2017, p292). In *A Man for All Seasons*, More’s silence can also be interpreted as a strategy to embarrass the court. An experienced lawyer of the caliber of Thomas More is expected to deconstruct and attack all the allegations and cases brought against him. However, since his fame and personality depend on his capacity to win the case, silence at some moments can be of a great support to avoid traps. It is reproached Thomas More with his refusal to publicly say he is against or for the divorce. He has intellectual capacity to speak clearly and convincingly or to twist and manipulate his speech in his favor. Yet, he keeps silent because as a lawyer he knows his silence will not cost him more

than an imprisonment: “And for my silence I am punished, with imprisonment” (Bolt, 1990, p150). Refusing to speak for his own defense can be viewed as a strategic silence since he expects the court to offer a positive interpretation to his silence: my “silence is not denial” (150) of the king’s divorce. If the court had interpreted More’s silence as his consent without seeking his own confession, he would have preserved his moral and religious integrity without being declared as a traitor. More uses silence to secure such kind of escape.

Besides, Thomas More knows that “Silence has different effects depending on what move it follows” (DiAngelo, 2016, p285). As a professional lawyer, he has defended many cases and has won some of them. In a sense, More is aware that silence in certain context can “represent either an expression of power or absence of power” (Nikolić, 2016, p1). Furthermore, it is then noted that “Silence is a lawyer’s tool, one too often unappreciated or outright ignored” (Rappaport, 2017, p289). In court, silence is a powerful tool to win a case. And according to Rappaport (ibid), “Understanding how and why silence is eloquent not only gives us the skill to be persuasive when we use silence, but also makes us aware of the tactic when silence is used against us”. Thomas More’s silence intends to play such role to a great extent. Contemplative silence is expressed when Thomas More holds that his silence is dictated by his own conscience. As such, he cannot refute allegations brought against him using subjective arguments since he thinks that his reality “is the domain of the inexpressible, of what cannot be spoken about, for it does not belong to language” (Selden et al., 2005:158). In a sense, More’s conscience and its rebellious attitude cannot be translated in words. So, in order to avoid violating his conscience, silence is used to preserve it the way it is felt and experienced (Sarah, 2017). Toward the end of the play, and consequently the end of his trial, silence as resignation is observed through the attitude of Thomas More when it is definitely held that he is sentenced to death. When he is allowed to answer to a false accusation brought against him by Richard Rich, More angrily asks: “Is it probable – is it probable – that after so long a silence on this, the very point so urgently sought of me, I should open my mind to such a man as that?” (Bolt, 1990:156). It can then be argued that More’s “being in a restless emotional or mental state stems from the feeling that certain desires or goals will never be achieved” (Zuhair, 2020, p52). More, therefore, decides to make economy of words to avoid self-punishment. Being charged of “High Treason” (Bolt, 1990, p150), More has understood that the trial has been rigged by political machinery of the King. Choosing silence as a mode of expression, More shows his disappointment, desperation and resignation at seeing injustice and manipulation pervert the court and the whole kingdom.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to discuss the interpretations of silence in *A Man for All Season*. In the light of a psychoanalytical approach, the paper has investigated different forms of silence through the related literature. It has then contributed to gain insight into the attitude and motivation behind Thomas More's silence and this has helped to question the latter's martyrdom. In a sense, the paper has shown that Thomas More has willingly made his tragedy possible by using his silence inappropriately throughout his trial. Most definitely, it is not because silence can be easily taken for the absence of speech or communication that it does not function. Even when its presence seems to be imperceptible, it remains as sounds that we can barely hear or of which we are not aware until alerted to them. Today, Thomas More's silence informs the meaningful silence which can be felt among the oppressed and marginalized people in society. This silence awaits to be addressed or spoken to in order to deliver its message or to be proved empty as shown during the trial of Thomas More in *A Man for All Season*. Thomas More is probably a victim of the dictatorship of the current Age of Noise which celebrates and promotes noise in such a way that any practice of silence is combated. Silence which helps people to explore their inner world and potential as evidenced by Thomas More's conscience is destroyed by physical or mental noise or noise of desire.

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