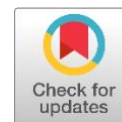


# ‘Don’t look for meaning in the words. Listen to the silences’: A conceptual framework for silence as a medium for power in the Arts



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history

Received 25 April 2024

Revised 22 May 2024

Accepted 29 May 2024

### Keywords

Seamus Heaney

Silence

Power

## ABSTRACT

The concept of silence is somewhat mercurial. Far from an absence of sound, various artists have explored the nuances of its construction, perhaps most famously by the composer John Cage in his seminal composition “4”33”. Despite this artistic exploration, examinations of silence as a feature of expression are scarce, as is an apt theorisation of what remains unspoken, and how this may be more powerful an expression than speech. By conceptualising silence through a political theory lens of power as social action upon boundaries, I argue that silence is used to establish, negotiate, and trouble social and political boundaries and as a vehicle for power as social action. Drawing upon Seamus Heaney’s poems “Whatever you say, say nothing” and “Clearances”, I apply a four-part framework to conceptualise silence as linguistic, epistemic, rhetoric and symbolic, concluding that silence is the conceptual glue that unites manifestations of power and demarcates action upon boundaries.



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How to Cite: Hanna, A. (2024). ‘Don’t look for meaning in the words. Listen to the silences’: a conceptual framework for silence as a medium for power in the Arts. *Journal of Silence Studies in Education*, 3(2), 157-169. <https://doi.org/10.31763/jsse.v3i2.104>

## 1. Introduction

Several giants of the Arts have experimentally tested the boundaries of our social distinction between the two states of sound and silence. Samuel Beckett, novelist and playwright, argued that meaning lies in the silences, not in words, and urged attention to the ‘kind of silence one keeps’ (Beckett, 2012: 20). Harold Pinter, playwright and screenwriter, wrote that there are two silences: one when there is no speech, and one when a torrent of language is employed. For Pinter, speech is a smokescreen, an ‘indication of that which we don’t hear’; communication is what is left unsaid (Pinter, 2009). John Cage (1973), experimental composer, famously declared that there is no such thing as absolute silence – exemplified in his 4”33 work which was intended to distinguish between figure and sound, and between social and cultural attitudes to sound and silence. The 1952 composition is made up not of literal silence, but contextual sounds. It was controversial at the time, and tested audience’s attitudes to silence; a notion perhaps more accurately captured as the absence of intended sound. Seamus Heaney, poet and playwright, also experimented with silences and the unsaid in his works, most notably regarding societal change through civil conflict and familial relationships.

Silence, in these experiments, is not ‘nothing’ but incorporates attitudes and norms in the form of social actions manifested in the resistances, subversions and deliberations used to negotiate social boundaries (Hanna, 2024). It is, therefore, an irreducible concept; a device used to delimit and



constitute social action. In this article, I draw on existing conceptualisations of power to argue that silence amplifies and renders visible the workings of power as action upon social boundaries. I begin by briefly reviewing conceptualisations of power in political theory, before presenting a theoretical framework of silence through which to examine manifestations of power (Hanna, 2024). The article concludes by employing this four-part framework of silence as interwoven linguistic, epistemic, rhetoric and symbolic components to highlight silence as a vehicle for power in Seamus Heaney's poems *Whatever you say, say nothing* and *Clearances*.

## 2. What is Power

Debates about power and what it is centre around the idea of freedom; the extent to which action is independent of the influence of others, and an accurate reflection of desires and interests (Hayward, 1998, 2000). To examine how silence makes visible the workings of power, it is first necessary to explore the various definitions and conceptualisations of power commonly referred to as 'faces'. This section draws upon a more extended discussion elsewhere (Hanna, 2024; Hayward, 1998, 2000), but highlights the more relevant aspects of the debate for the purposes of considering Heaney's poetry.

Power as a political concept became a hotly debated topic in the 1950s and 1960s, when Dahl (1957, 1961) presented power as something that is possessed or acquired and used to create particular effects on others by asking the question 'what does it mean to say that A has power over B?' Dahl answered this question with 'A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do' (Dahl, 1957: 202-203). This definition of power became known as the 'first face' of power, formalising power as something that is possessed in conflict with others. In this analysis, power is a zero-sum attribute that is acquired and held; won or lost. In the 'second face' of power, Bachrach and Baratz (1970) suggested that the hidden face of power is not about winning or losing power, but about keeping certain issues and actors from decision-making in the first place. The second face argues that power may work to limit actions of the powerless through the 'mobilisation of bias':

A set of predominant values, beliefs, rituals and institutional procedures ('rules of the game') that operate systematically and consistently to the benefit of certain persons and groups at the expense of others' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970: 43).

The capacity for discrimination is clear in this 'mobilisation of bias', which is sustained primarily through 'non-decisions'. This creates and maintains barriers that preclude certain issues getting onto the agenda: 'to the extent that a person or group – consciously or unconsciously – creates or reinforces barriers to the public airing of conflict, that person or group has power' (p96). Bachrach and Baratz state that existing conceptualisations of power overlook the exercise of power in restricting debate to safe subjects, effecting a silence on taboo or politically sensitive subjects.

Both the first and second faces of power are understood as liberal understandings of power because power is characterised as conflict between agents who are advancing their interests against the interests of others (Digeser, 1992). In the radical, or 'third' face of power, Lukes (1974, 2005) asserts that the liberal understandings of power fail to offer an adequate explanation for non-participation, quiescence, and silence. Where liberal notions of power argue that power is about getting someone to do something that they would not otherwise do, Lukes (1974) argues that power also shapes ways in which social actors perceive their own interests and desires. This third face of power was radical because it goes beyond A having power over B to consider how A might exercise power over B by influencing and defining the desires of B, which might be contrary to his own interests (Lukes, 1974, 2005). Gaventa (1980), in his conceptualisation of power, similarly looked outside decision-making forums to specify how social power influences or determines our perceptions of need, desire and interest. This had the potential to include, Gaventa argued, social myths, language and symbols and an examination of how they are manipulated or shaped in processes of power.

Whilst the radical face of power demonstrated that the exercise of power is based on the processes of power behind the social construction of meaning, it retained the 'faces' of power and the dyad of powerful A and powerless B set by Dahl in the early debates (Hayward, 1998, 2000). In Foucault's conceptualisation, the conceptualisation of power moved away from the definitive positions of being either an "A" or a "B" to presenting power as socially constructed. Foucault challenged the common binary of power with a 'face', conceptualising power as inherently unstable and dynamic: 'less of a

face-to-face confrontation which paralyses both sides than a permanent provocation' (1983: 222). Foucault argues that power cannot be viewed merely as something which flows from the top of a social hierarchy downwards, but a notion that must be understood in 'capillary forms of existence' which influences actions, attitudes, discourses and learning processes of individuals from the bottom up (Foucault, 1980a: 39). In this sense, it is something of a network:

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization (1980: 98).

Foucault's interest was therefore not in conceptualisations of power as a resource that can be 'possessed', but as something that is exercised (Foucault, 2003: 13):

a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action... (Foucault, 1983: 220).

The connection between uses of silence as a device to delimit and constitute social action becomes more visible because Foucault conceptualises power as a mode of action that acts upon other actions. Moreover, the propensity of silence to both delimit and constitute is more palpable given Foucault's claim that all contemporary analyses of power were based on a version of power as a negative and repressive concept because they identified power only in the form of a dualistic relationship between a ruler and the ruled. These analyses depicted power as a 'negative' oppression by constraining and limiting what subjects do and desire (Foucault, 1977; cf. Lukes, 1974). On the other hand, Foucault highlighted that power as constitutive or productive is 'positive': it can induce pleasure, construct knowledge and produce the subject (Foucault, 1977). We must, according to Foucault, stop describing power in the negative as a phenomenon that excludes, represses, masks, and censors because doing so exclusively ignores power's productive quality. Power, ultimately, is ambivalent – it has neither an inherently 'negative' nor 'positive' inclination. For Foucault (1990: 101):

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power... Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance.

Foucault (1998: 8) further observes that society 'speaks verbosely of its own silence' by going to great lengths to convey the things it does not say. Foucault's work makes the incontrovertible connection between silence and power clear:

Silence itself – the thing one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorised, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underline and permeate discourses (Foucault, 1998: 27).

Similarly to Foucault (1980) who emphasised that there is no binary opposition between the powerful and the powerless in power relations, Hayward argues that power's mechanisms are best considered as boundaries. These boundaries exist in laws, rules, norms, social identities, and standards which both constrain *and* enable action. Under Hayward's (1998, 2000) conceptualisation, the mechanisms of power present themselves in the form of practices and the institutions that govern these practices. Practices include social boundaries to action such as standards of character or achievement against which actors are measured. These practices are governed by institutions: the system of laws, norms, routines and procedures that determine rights and duties; sanctions and rewards. Hayward's conceptualisation of power examines the impact of these social practices and institutions on individual participation in shaping their own environments.

The conceptualisation of power posited by Hayward rejects the negative definition of freedom which is implicit in the first three faces of power as a state in which actors choose action independently. Freedom under power defaced is productive: ‘the capacity to act *upon*, or in ways that affect, the boundaries that constrain and enable social action’ (Hayward, 2000: 31). Whilst the definition of power as action upon boundaries by Hayward creates a space for a conceptualisation of these boundaries being negotiated by silence, silence does not feature in her work. It is my claim that we use silence to navigate these boundaries as a device that delimits and constitutes social action, and therefore, it is uses of silence that render power visible.

### 3. Silence and Power

In philosophy and linguistics, research on silence first became popularised as a subject of academic study in the 1970s before developing into an interdisciplinary field of research (Jung, 2019). Yet, research on silence still needs coherence, and authors have repeatedly rearranged and organised functions, forms and significance of silence into various typologies (Jung, 2019). Scholars have organised silence according to type (e.g. Bruneau, 1973; Saville-Troike, 1985; Kurzon, 2007; Jaworski, 1993; see also Ferguson, 2003), cause (Verschuere, 1985) and function (Jensen, 1973; Ephratt, 2008), and Spyrou (2016) warns that although taxonomies of silence might be heuristically useful, no taxonomy of silence can be exhaustive because research is likely to reveal infinite varieties of silence. This conveys the breadth of the phenomenon, but also the lack of analytical focal point in the literature to date (Jung 2019, 2021), further highlighted by multiple interpretations of silence that fall into binaries (Brito Vieira, 2019, 2021a), notwithstanding that silence is more complex than binary interpretations which often fold into each other (Brito Vieira, 2021b).

As highlighted above, silence is defined as a device used to delimit and constitute social action, and power as action upon social boundaries. Reconceptualising power’s mechanisms as boundaries that constrain and enable all social action allows us to reconsider the complexity of real-world silences. Based on Hanna’s (2024) taxonomy of silence (See Figure 1), adapted from Clair (1998), the linguistic, epistemic, rhetoric and symbolic components of silence reflect four common assumptions about silence that are challenged by this taxonomy: that silence is merely the absence of sound (linguistic); that silence is a state of ‘not knowing’ (epistemic); that silence is ‘respect’ (rhetoric); and that silence is the exercise of authority (symbolic) (Hanna, 2024).

The first component, ‘linguistic silence’ presents silence as a prototypical linguistic phenomenon, and an acknowledgement that silence is necessary for communication in many contexts. This theme challenges these assumptions, however, by highlighting that while literal, these silences are also relational and are instrumental in humouring and negotiating with others, but also as a means of defending oneself. The second ‘epistemic’ component highlights our epistemological assumptions about the nature of social reality – that there is a truth we can find and make sense of provided we use the right way to access and capture it. This epistemological assumption reflects the ‘voice model’ of silence which suggests that participation is demonstrated by voice, and repression or marginalisation in terms of non-participation or being ‘silenced’. In this epistemic component, therefore, silence is conceptualised as both referential in its capacity to conceal and expose, as well as reticence or resignation.

Using silence as rhetoric is a form of productive silence distinguished by Foucault (1977). These silences are communicative and deliberative: they are employed to create a space for censure, to tease where the unspoken is the desired communication such as in satire or irony; and to communicate strong emotion. They are also employed in environments where one needs to regulate or reflect, and to discern or appraise others. Silence as rhetoric is also a communicative device of dissent and protest which can manifest in *indirect* modes such as euphemism and humour. This theme is also closely related to the symbolic component which renders visible our assumptions about power. Symbolic silences concern direct *and* indirect exercise of power and authority. Whilst silences here are frequently communicative and deliberative, they are deployed subversively or authoritatively. For example, one might deploy silence as defiance or refusal, or express dissent using silence. Other silences are used in this sense to discipline and control others, to censor and obstruct.

Reconceptualising power’s mechanisms as boundaries that constrain and enable all social action allows an examination of real-world silences. However, the use of Hanna’s (2024) four-part framework, whilst tackling four common assumptions about silence, might lead a reader to think that

silences occur discretely and fit neatly into each component. Instead, these various components are frequently deployed simultaneously and act upon various interlocutors at the same time. That is, the four components of linguistic, epistemic, rhetoric and symbolic fold into one another and are rarely distinct. The analysis that follows is therefore not organised into discrete components, but considered on a rolling basis as Heaney's poetry exhibits the component parts.



Fig. 1. Taxonomy of Silence (Hanna, 2024)

#### 4. Silence Naturally Drives Mechanisms of Internal Change

Seamus Heaney wrote frequently about The Troubles, an ethno-religious conflict in Northern Ireland that lasted from the late 1960s until the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. More than 3,700 people were killed (McKittrick et al, 2007) and over 47,000 wounded (CAIN, nd), with 54% and 68% representing civilian deaths and injuries respectively (Fay et al, 1999). This conflict provides the backdrop to *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing*, published in Heaney's (1992) *North* collection at the height of the Troubles. The poem shrewdly contrasts the onomatopoeic clamour of war and conflict with Pinter's (2009) observation that communication is what is left unsaid. Indeed, the poem strikingly makes the point that it is through the unsaid that Northern Ireland citizens impart or imply their community identity and deploy these silences for survival in communities that became increasingly tribal during the conflict. In *Clearances*, however, Heaney (1998) highlights the productive aspects of silence by depicting a home unified by the unspoken in contrast to open declarations of love. The relationship with his mother conveyed in *Clearances* is ritualistic, and even the silences that exist between them are rituals.

Linguistic silences include prototypical silences and relational silences; those employed to negotiate and preserve relationships. In *Clearances*, Heaney reflects upon his relationship with his mother after her death in 8 Petrarchan sonnets. The poem travels forwards in time, beginning with an inherited story about his great-grandmother in Sonnet 1 to childhood memories in sonnets 2-7 and the most recent memory in Sonnet 8 of the loss of direction following his mother's death. Throughout his reflection on their relationship, linguistic silences feature as a common occurrence; there is no dialogue between mother and son throughout the poetry, except the reported speech of *Don't make noise when you stir*; a direction to a child in his grandparents' house. In the third and fourth sonnets, however, we hear the silences that unified the bond between the speaker and his mother. For example, in Sonnet 3, *I was all hers as we peeled potatoes./They broke the silence, let fall one by one depicts*

the speaker's pleasure at having his mother's undivided attention yet no dialogue is exchanged. Mother and son work silently together, *Cold comforts set between us, things to share/Gleaning in a bucket of clean water./And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes/From each other's work would bring us to our senses.* The language highlights not only the shared silence, but the shared tasks, the onomatopoeic 'splashes' an acoustic reminder in this sonnet of their shared, companionable, literal silence.

Heaney's representation of working alongside his mother includes a ritualistic aspect to the silence (Saville-Troike, 1985), a feature extended throughout his memories of his mother, particularly in religious and household rituals. For example, in Sonnet 5, Heaney conveys the household task of folding *sheets just off the line*. In Heaney's memory, *we'd stretch and fold and end up hand to hand/For a split second as if nothing had happened/For nothing had that had not always happened.* In their expected and familiar 'nothing that had not always happened' silence, there is unacknowledged physical touch. This restraint and reticence might be understood to represent the crux of Heaney's relationship with his mother, *Coming close again by holding back/In moves where I was x and she was o* – the restraint of 'holding back' might suggest a bond that, while reserved, is held together with playful 'moves', but not verbal exchanges of love. This ritualistic aspect of their relationship is also highlighted in Sonnet 6 where mother and son are *Elbow to elbow, glad to be kneeling next/To each other up there near the front/Of the packed church, we would follow the text/And rubrics for the blessing of the font.* Here, the ritual of silence is institutional where the 'text and rubrics' present prescribed words. These, whilst not literal silences, are perhaps relational ones where Heaney's bond with his mother is through the ritualistic silence of prescribed language – not personal exchanges of dialogue. Indeed, they bear resemblance to Pinter's (2009) observation of silences where language is employed.

This silence is not merely linguistic, however; it is also a manifestation of rhetoric. This ritual of prescribed words in place of dialogue demarcates the relationship between Heaney and his mother in a space of reflection and respect for religious and social institutions such as the Catholic church and family respectively. This familial silence of rhetoric is further conveyed in Sonnet 7 where Heaney describes the taciturn figure of his father who, at the end of his mother's life, *said more to her/Almost than in all their life together* in an intimate space where *His head was bent down to her propped-up head.* The family relationships here highlight the intimacy of silence as a spatial concept (Jaworski, 1993), employed by Heaney to negotiate this new boundary of death:

*The space we stood around had been emptied  
Into us to keep, it penetrated  
Clearances that suddenly stood open.*

What might be a finite boundary of death, however, is blurred here as Heaney's mother becomes present by her absence, making way for a spatial quality of silence that 'suddenly stood open', perhaps contrasting the inhabited silences of household chores in Heaney's memory. This relational silence presents not only as a negotiation of death but as a medium through which familial relationships were negotiated. Far from candid declarations of love and affection, Heaney's family appear to be unified and constituted through practices of silence used to navigate various mechanisms of power as boundaries in the form of routines and rituals which service to 'produce' the subject in his family (Hayward, 1998, 2000; Foucault, 1977).

The use of silence as a linguistic strategy for avoiding candidness is also a feature of Heaney's *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing*, but in a very different context. *Whatever You Say* explores the Troubles conflict in Heaney's native Northern Ireland, prompted by the speaker's encounter with a journalist. Heaney takes a more political tone to highlight both the absence of nuance in the media's analysis of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and the corresponding lack of candidness in how civilians expressed their views on the conflict:

*Expertly civil tongued with civil neighbours  
On the high wires of first wireless reports,  
Sucking the fake taste, the stony flavours  
Of those sanctioned, old, elaborate reports:*

*'Oh, it's disgraceful, surely, I agree,'*

*'Where's it going to end?' 'It's getting worse.'*

These 'civil neighbours' are not candid about their views of the conflict, instead repeating the 'sanctioned' or official reports that lack nuance. These are not literal silences, but, perhaps more importantly, relational ones which serve important roles in preserving unity in the neighbourhood and protecting communities' collective identity. Yet, such silences also recall Bachrach and Baratz's (1970) argument that the exercise of power in conflict keeps politically sensitive issues off the deliberative agenda which creates or reinforces barriers in public airing of conflict. Heaney conveys this message as symbolic silence as he observes how these sanctioned reports have resulted in censorship of views and the prescription of what is acceptable to say and publish. Of course, there is an irony here, given that whilst the 'expertly civil tongued' neighbours do not confront these mechanisms of power, their 'civil tongues' are located in the context of a very violent airing of conflict; perhaps one that necessitates such silences for survival. Heaney's use of irony is, therefore, also a manifestation of silence as rhetoric, used to tease out where the unspoken is the desired communication.

These silences are deployed to negotiate the boundaries of conflict and relationships where the Troubles did not allow for nuance or finesse, but distinguished individuals and whole communities in tribal terms, despite the literal omission of religion in the collective discourse: Heaney observes that *Religion's never mentioned here, of course*, with more than a little irony given his verbose use of silence in *Whatever You Say* to discuss just that. Where religion is depicted in the rituals of linguistic silences in *Clearances*, it is treated very differently in *Whatever You Say*, where the silences are not productive or intimate, but a conspiracy of silence amid civil conflict. Heaney's use of silence as verbose rhetoric does not cure his *pestering/ Drouth for words at once both gaff and bait/To lure the tribal shoals to epigram/And order*. Despite his literary skill, Heaney finds that *Yet for all this art and sedentary trade/I am incapable*. This writers' block – a literal silence or omission – is perhaps an implicit suggestion that there are no words to adequately express the horrors of the Troubles, or a reflection of the collective silence about religion and the atrocities that took place in its name; a further example of silence as rhetoric, used to communicate the ineffable.

Epistemic silences fall into two categories: referential silence with its capacity to conceal and expose; and pedagogical with its focus on knowledge as a regurgitation, co-opting knowledge for different purposes, or using silence to avoid or mask knowledge (or lack thereof) (Hanna, 2024). In *Clearances*, Heaney makes two passing references to class mobility. In the ritual of folding sheets with his mother, their moves are described by Heaney as *Inscribed in sheets she'd sewn from ripped-out flour sacks*, highlighting the modest farmer background from which Heaney heralded on his father's side, and the local linen mill employment on his mother's side. Heaney attained higher levels of education than both his parents, beginning with a scholarship to a grammar school in Derry, Northern Ireland. This class mobility is presented in Sonnet 4 of *Clearances*, where Heaney describes how his mother's *Fear of affectation made her affect/Inadequacy whenever it came to/Pronouncing words 'beyond her'*. His mother's aversion to what might be described in the local vernacular as 'getting above your station' or 'putting on airs and graces' to which one is not entitled compelled her to pretend to get things wrong, or mask her own educational background, which led to a mutual ritual of the unspoken between mother and son. In reciprocity, Heaney refused to expose his mother to error by compromising his linguistic ability to protect her discreetly:

*I governed my tongue*

*In front of her, a genuinely well-*

*Adjusted adequate betrayal*

*Of what I knew better.*

In doing so, Heaney masked his own educational standing or knowledge, making deliberate mistakes and using vernacular language to maintain their bond in the face of irreconcilable cultural capital without ever directly speaking of it:

*I'd naw and aye  
And decently relapse into the wrong  
Grammar which kept us allied and at bay.*

Heaney's use of silence here is also rhetorical; a manifestation of his relationship with his mother. Heaney's protection of his mother manifests itself not only in his choice of words, but his choice of silence – to 'govern his tongue' but to do so in a paradoxical manner framed as 'betrayal'. A word usually associated with treacherously exposing information and disloyalty, Heaney uses silence to express his loyalty to his mother and discreetly speak to class mobility and its effect on his relationships.

Where such silence is exercised to preserve and constitute familial unity in *Clearances*, in *Whatever You Say*, Heaney uses silence to highlight ignorance, opening the poem with *I'm writing just after an encounter/With an English journalist in search of 'views'/On the Irish thing*. The 'Irish thing' is of course a co-opted reference to the Troubles, and is therefore also silence as rhetoric, used to communicate Heaney's contempt for a downplayed and dismissive approach by the British media to the conflict, and a combined lack of understanding about a situation that was far more nuanced than its tribal representation. Heaney highlights how this representation had become something like white noise: *bad news is no longer news*, which subverts or resists the prevailing accounts of the conflict. These accounts are similarly treated as ventriloquism by Heaney who is just as unlikely to turn to religion as to these reports:

*But I incline as much to rosary beads  
As to the jottings and analyses  
Of politicians and newspapermen  
Who've scribbled down the long campaign from gas  
And protest to gelignite and sten,  
Who proved upon their pulses 'escalate',  
'Backlash' and 'crack down', 'the provisional wing',  
'Polarization' and 'long-standing hate'?*

Heaney depicts these reports as careless 'jottings' and 'scribbles' by reporters with no political acumen in representing the events they are reporting. Their recourse to the soundbites and headlines included in Heaney's verse is a performance or an act of ventriloquism in which accounts are merely repeated, but do not capture or elicit the experiences of those who live the conflict every day, such as Heaney who remarks *Yet I live here, I live here too*. These reports take on the status of something akin to a dog whistle – the use of the unspoken in the form of coded language to express support for one group without provoking confrontation. Heaney highlights how the lack of nuance in reporting delivers a very different and subtly aimed political message – silence as rhetoric – but also symbolic where these messages are an exercise of power deployed to control the dominant narrative about the conflict.

Other epistemic silences in the poem extend to the referential nature of silence: concealing identity or views. In stanza II, Heaney suggests that the treatment of Catholics as inferior in the run up to the Troubles *Still leaves us fork-tongued on the border bit:/The liberal papist note sounds hollow/When amplified and mixed in with the bangs*. Heaney suggests that this community avoids openly discussing closer ties with the Republic of Ireland, but that the silence of regurgitating the sanctioned 'liberal papist note' is muted or empty in contrast to the noise of death and destruction and, perhaps the propaganda that accompanied this destruction. Heaney's use of the term 'fork-tongued' suggests that the equivocation or absence of candidness on the part of this community was employed to avoid committing to an idea or an identity. This is ironic, given that in concealing identity, others in Northern Ireland could tell community background anyway and highlights how such silences are

communicative rhetoric. Of course, this silence was not exclusive to one community, but a nationwide *famous Northern Ireland reticence, the tight gag of place and times* in which one had to conceal or censor oneself for survival. The implicit threat that accompanies such silence is present throughout this poem, but particularly where Heaney references the title *whatever you say, say nothing* in stanza III; regurgitating an IRA propaganda poster during the Troubles which warned that ‘loose talk costs lives’ and ‘Whatever you say – say nothing’. The threat to beware of unguarded speech is clear, although implicit.

Heaney’s acerbic tone when he describes the veneer of civilian politeness highlights the performativity of these silences. The media-approved and officially ‘sanctioned’ reports are repeated for show, but this censors honest debate and exchange about the conflict; polite clichés and moralistic platitudes stifle critical debate, for example, of British internment policy:

*They’re murderers. Internment, understandably.*

*The ‘voice of sanity’ is getting hoarse.*

Heaney returns to the British internment policy at the end of the poem with an observation of Long Kesh from the M1 motorway: a symbol of British hegemonic power and the location for interned, disproportionately Catholic, prisoners:

*This morning from a dewy motorway*

*I saw the new camp for the internees:*

*A bomb had left a crater of fresh clay*

*In the roadside, and over in the trees*

*Machine-gun posts defined a real stockade.*

Whilst the final stanza might seem like mere observation, Heaney employs the unspoken to ‘speak verbosely’ about the silences commandeered by media representation and censorship. In doing so, he troubles the official accounts by the media; in this symbolic silence, the ventriloquism of the ‘sanctioned’ and ‘elaborate’ reports serves to discipline absent voices. Heaney shrewdly sees through these performative silences of political correctness employed to appear impartial, emphasised when he later observes the affected impartiality of ‘*One side’s as bad as the other*’, *never worse* employed to remove nuanced debate and discipline the *voice of sanity*.

Heaney’s illustration of Foucault’s (1998) verbose discussion of society’s silences is aptly applied to the role of religion in Northern Irish society and in community identity. His quip ‘*You know them by their eyes*’ is a reference to a sectarian trope that Roman Catholics’ eyes were ‘close together’ and Protestants’ eyes were ‘far apart’ to convey the verbosity of our silences for ascertaining someone’s community background. For example, there is an unspoken understanding that by various *manoeuvrings*, Northern Irish people can tell what background you are from if they know your name, address and school<sup>1</sup>:

*Smoke-signals are loud-mouthed compared with us:*

*Manoeuvrings to find out name and school,*

*Subtle discrimination by addresses*

Heaney makes further reference to the domineering role of religion in Northern Protestantism *Where to be saved you only must save face*, deploying, somewhat ironically, the imagery of salvation to contrast the use of silence to avoid exposure or detection, and where salvation is predicated on not speaking your mind. This use of ‘saving face’ is an act of power (see Hanna, 2021), and the self-defence that manifests silence as rhetoric, but also an act of dominance as it is shrouded in the threat of violence; a manifestation of symbolic silence. In the next line, *Whatever you say, say nothing*, the unspoken reference is to an IRA paramilitary recruitment poster discussed above. Such silences placed the *tight gag of place* upon society using disciplinary silences to stifle debate and exercise symbolic

<sup>1</sup> Education remains divided on religious grounds today in Northern Ireland. At present, 5% of schools (n=97) in Northern Ireland are integrated, and 8% of students (n= 21,183) access integrated education (Department of Education, 2023). Housing also remains largely segregated.

power. It is these manifestations of silence that promulgate directives to *hold your tongue*, or not get involved. Heaney highlights the *Northern reticence* that exists in Northern Ireland where self-censorship is frequently deployed to obstruct open debate, but also to obstruct civil society and moving beyond the conflict.

The discursive ‘dance’, or the use of semiotic gestures employed to avoid the necessity of speech, highlight the use of silent codes in Northern Irish society for secrecy, but also duplicity. Heaney hails Northern Ireland as a land where the use of silence as communicative rhetoric, but also used to convey symbolic power both reflected its superficial impartiality, and also the fact that civil conflict made it into a cunning and oftentimes predatory society:

*O land of password, handgrip, wink and nod,  
Of open minds as open as a trap,  
Where tongues lie coiled, as under flames lie wicks,  
Where half of us, as in a wooden horse  
Were cabin'd and confined like wily Greeks,  
Besieged within the siege, whispering morse.*

This excerpt begins with the use of silent symbols or semiotics as communicative medium of rhetoric, but instantly conveys the nuance that Heaney suggests is missing at the beginning of the poem: the superficial impartiality is surmised as ‘open minds as open as a trap’ where ‘tongues lie coiled’. The conflict and the various manifestations of power through the medium of different types of silence have made society duplicitous and tight-lipped, or tightly ‘gagged’. These silences are therefore subversive because in using silences to protect communities and individuals, whether it be by performing superficial impartiality or holding your tongue to protect against unguarded talk, what has transpired instead is communities ‘besieged within the siege’; excluded within and without their own communities and reduced to communicating by coded gestures or ‘whispering morse’.

## 5. Implications and Applications for Education for Well-Being and Self-Inquiry

Heaney’s poetry is an excellent example of Foucault’s notion of speaking verbosely using silence; his poetry speaks powerfully of the different ways of communicating through not saying things, and how silence functions with and in relation to things spoken. Through his verbose representation of meanings that lie in silence (Beckett, 2012) and his exploration of speech as a smokescreen (Pinter, 2009), Heaney employs the art of the unspoken in his poetry through what the speaker declines to say, is forbidden to say, but communicates through the unspoken where discretion is required.

A reader might wonder what a paper exploring the nature of silence in poetry and the Arts has to contribute to contemporary debates. Heaney’s poetry demonstrates beautifully that silence is both a notion that binds – in relational and rhetorical exchanges – and a notion that breaks – in symbolic exercises of power. Whilst Heaney’s work explored armed conflict during the Troubles in Northern Ireland in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, it speaks just as powerfully to the various silences that surround public debates about the horrors of war taking place against civilians today. As we collectively speak verbosely of our own silences, perhaps Heaney’s poetry is a timely reminder of Beckett’s wisdom: meaning lies in the silences, not in words, and in the ‘kinds of silence’ we keep.

### Declarations

- Author contribution** : Amy Hanna was the sole author of the text.
- Funding statement** : No funding was received.
- Conflict of interest** : The author declares no conflict of interest.
- Declaration of ethics** : I as author acknowledge that this work has been written based on ethical research that conforms with the regulations of my university.  
I support *The Journal of Silence Studies in Education (JSSE)* in maintaining high standards of personal conduct, practicing honesty in all our professional practices and endeavors.
- Additional information** : No additional information is available for this article.

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