
Spaces and Silences in the Novels of David Lodge

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Abstract

Even though silence is conventionally seen as merely absence of sound, emptiness bare of any definition, it can, in fact, have a multiplicity of meanings. It is used to negate, to express a variety of emotions, to maintain the status quo or to threaten it. The use of silence in fiction is of particular interest due to the plurality of ways of expression that a literary text provides.

*Although silence itself is not used as an independent motif in David Lodge's work, many of his narratives use it as a tool to represent certain feelings, power interpersonal relations or relations between people and institutions. One such novel, and the one that focuses on such relations the most, is *Deaf Sentence* (2008), which recounts a process of the loss of hearing by a former professor of linguistics. In my research, I aim to explore the possibility of connecting deafness (and, hence, silence) with the places the character occupies, visits or avoids, and investigate the relations that are built between the main character and the space around him with the involvement of both sound and silence, as well as the balance of noise and silence of the spaces the protagonist occupies as a means of reinforcing the representation of the character development and provide additional levels of understanding of the conflicts touched upon by the novel.*

*While focusing on *Deaf Sentence*, I will draw examples of the use of silence as a tool of representation from other novels written by David Lodge, and examine whether silence of spaces can be identified as influencing the narrative. To do so, I will utilise existing research on silence provided by the works of Judith Butler, Michael Foucault and Maria Tumarkin, as well as relevant findings in the field of space studies.*

Key words: *silence, space, deafness, fiction, David Lodge*

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Sound and silence are very often understood as purely presence and absence of noise respectively. The presence of sound is perceived as multiplicity, as the presence of variation, since it, indeed, has a number of objective qualities, such as volume, tone, and pitch, which provide for the existence of an almost endless variety of sounds. Silence, on the other hand, is very often associated with emptiness, and even though the definition of silence through absence can be true from the point of view of physics, it is very often the opposite when it comes to semiotics. “There is not one but many silences,” argues Michel Foucault and goes on to say that silence is often an integral part of discourses, as, in his example, the active avoidance of the topic of sex in educational institutions (Foucault 27). This is one of many instances: silence is not only absence of noise, but also a presence of a diversity of meanings; it can be a momentary silence of unuttered words or an all-consuming silence of deafness after an explosion. The paradox of the combination of the absence from the physical world and the presence of meaning is of particular interest for the present research, since this conflict is what connects silence with space and place.

Since silence is frequently defined as absence and emptiness, it is important to note that both of these words are frequently used to characterise space, and are essentially physical and spatial in their nature. Both sound and silence are closely associated with space, as they are often determined by space: physical boundaries define the movement of sounds and, in a way, contain silences. Sam Halliday introduces the helpful term “sound-space”, which he defines as “the production by specific spaces of distinctive sonic signatures; or, conversely, the inscription of information about such spaces’ size, configuration, inhabitants and so on, by the sounds produced within them” (53). These characteristics can become essential in analysing the spaces fictional characters occupy, as they provide an additional level of understanding of the processes unfolding in the narrative. However, the connection between space and silence is not limited to the laws of the physical world. It is not only space that often defines silence, but vice versa, silence can become a factor that determines space — culturally, politically, spiritually, etc. — when it turns into one of the rules of conduct in particular places. It lies in the realm of common understanding that, for instance, a cemetery is a place that requires silence: in this case, silence — through the nature of place and its requirements — becomes a symbol for mourning and respect. In the dichotomy of noise and silence, silence is usually perceived as a negative notion. Most of the common collocations bear negative denotations and connotations (*awkward, embarrassed, deathly*, etc.,

as opposed to a much smaller number of perceived positive: *companionable*, in a way — *expectant*) (*Oxford Collocations Dictionary* 713). However, due to the neutral nature of the phenomenon, the “positivity” and “negativity” of it are very often subjective, just as the silence itself can be seen as both objective and subjective.

Objective silence is the one that belongs to the physical world, the absence of any sound (a perfect example being outer space); while subjective silence is determined by perception: in such a case, silence is the absence of sound as perceived by an individual or a group of people (for instance, hearing loss after an explosion). This is true not only for the dichotomy of sound and silence, but for the wider spectrum of categories and attributes, as even the changes in the characteristics of silence can be subjective (ééuchewycz 247).

A number of David Lodge’s novels display the connection between spaces and objective silence, as well as between the former two and power. Silence often reinforces the status quo established by the rules and regulations that pertain to certain places. The silence of the Reading Room of the British Museum in *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (1965) serves two functions related to power, protective and restrictive. On one hand, “no sounds of traffic or other human business penetrated to that warm, airless space” (*The British Museum* 44), so the visitors were protected from noise and, hence, could better focus on their work, but on the other hand, the internal silence of the library is not only a result of the scholars being occupied by their work, but also of strict regulations that enjoin one to stay silent in the walls of a library. Such a place of silence, being one of the most distinct and frequently described settings in the novel, paints a picture of the main character as a person who is ready to follow the rule of silence for the benefit of being allowed on the premises.

However, silence can become an act of resistance to the status quo when it appears in the middle of a conversation: not giving an answer to a question, disrupting a conversation by staying silent is something many of Lodge’s characters do. For instance, one of the protagonists of the play *The Writing Game* (1991), Maude, a writer in residence who can use words as her “work tools” and “weapons”, exercises her power over the other characters by not giving her opinion or by expressing silent disagreement with what others — very often to no effect — try to oppose with words (14). Judith Butler explains that in such cases silence questions the authority of the opponent or “attempts to circumscribe a domain of autonomy [of the person] that cannot or should not be intruded upon” (12). Butler explores silence from the

point of view of self-narration, and indeed, sometimes silence provides more for the narrative than words.

Similarly to enclosed spaces of private and public spheres, the urban soundscape Lodge's characters live in and are exposed to calls attention to multiple undertones of the meaning of silence as well. Quiet streets can be eerie and potentially dangerous in their emptiness and silence when suspense is necessary: "the tip-tap of her own heels on the pavement was Bridget's only company during the long walk through the bleak back-doubles" narrates *The Picturegoers* (1960) (160), while the reader is aware that at the end of the deserted street there is a dangerous man waiting to attack Bridget. *Therapy* (1995), on the other hand, describes the quiet and safe streets of a suburban residential area the main character lives in to then juxtapose their silence with "noise not just from the traffic, but also from the high-pitched whine of restaurant ventilator fans" in the noise-polluted streets of central London (*Therapy* 48).

On the level of spirituality, silence also plays a significant role for a number of Lodge's characters in various novels — there is no description of a devoted Catholic without following the character to church, where he or she keeps respectful silence throughout the mass. But silence is a feature that is representative not only of the books' characters. The main question brought into the title of the novel *How Far Can You Go?* (1980) is addressed to the Catholic Church (regarding its restrictions on sexual practices) and stays unanswered throughout the novel. It is also possible to say that the question is most probably ultimately addressed to God who also remains silent.

It becomes clear from the above that a number of David Lodge's novels utilise silence and its relation to spaces and places as a tool of representation and emphasis. However, in no other novel is silence used in a more interesting and polysemantic way than in *Deaf Sentence* (2008). While the novel has been thoroughly investigated from various points of view, including its treatment of deafness, death related symbolism and narrative features (Necula, 72; Bekhta, 59), the question of the importance of the interrelation of spaces and sounds in the narrative has not, to my knowledge, been raised before. Although the significance of such details may not be immediately obvious, it is possible to argue that they serve as a symbolic representation of the protagonist's state of mind and understanding of the problems touched upon in the course of story.

To recognise the variety of functions and meanings silence has in the novel and how they are connected with spaces, it is important to acknowledge that in many cases the understanding of sound and

silence can depend on the individual perception of those experiencing them and on the general understanding of the meaning of the concepts at hand in a given society or group.

In contrast with the objective silence of spaces, deafness can be seen as an example of subjective silence, since, even though, objectively, it is caused by the changes in the human body, this absence of sound, auditory emptiness, only exists for the person with the hearing impairment. Subjectivity in this case lies not only in the personal affectedness of an individual, but also in the general perception of the world and understanding of the processes around. Used as a motif in a literary text, the representation of the process of the loss of hearing — along with an important social role of the depiction of an often underrepresented medical problem — can become a valuable tool in moving the story forward and an intriguing way of character depiction.

David Lodge's novel *Deaf Sentence* deals with hearing loss on multiple levels — it explores the main character's personal struggles with socialising, with the use of a hearing aid and with his work and private life, while at the same time employing a set of literary techniques to connect and associate deafness with larger-scale, more abstract concepts, such as death, loneliness, powerlessness.

The text invokes the association with death, as the phrase “death sentence” is among the first ones to come to mind as one reads the title of the book. There is, indeed, a connection between silence and death, as, while life is often associated with noise and movement, death, being the opposite of life, calls for the bond with silence and stillness. The main character acknowledges this connection in his diaries: “Often only the context allows me to distinguish between ‘deaf’ and ‘death’ or ‘dead’, and sometimes the words seem interchangeable. Deafness is a kind of pre-death, a drawn-out introduction to the long silence into which we will all eventually lapse” (*Deaf Sentence* 14). The novel's protagonist Desmond Bates wonders if there is a Deaf Instinct comparable with Freud's Death Instinct, an “unconscious longing for torpor, silence and solitude underlying and contradicting the normal human desire for companionship and intercourse?” (*Deaf Sentence* 119) Desmond eventually finds the answer to his question while visiting Auschwitz and experiencing its silent “landscape of death”. The experience of vast, empty and completely silent space gives him a better understanding of his place in the world and the significance of his condition.

The novel explores the theme of death in a number of ways: the main character, Desmond Bates, has to both witness and accommodate

the deaths of his wife and his father, while also supervising a PhD dissertation that focuses on the stylistics of suicide notes. It is important to highlight that the absence of such notes is of particular interest for the student conducting the research (the silence of the person who commits suicide seems unsettling and provocative to her), which is contrasted with the fact that Desmond's relatives (and he himself) were vocal about the preferences for how they want to pass away.

Taken at its face value, the title of the book is no less engaging. While Lodge provides the reader with select definitions of the word "sentence", the second half of the book's title, he omits the first one, "deaf", which is of interest for the present analysis. *Cambridge Dictionary* defines "deaf" as "unable to hear, either completely or partly" or "unwilling to listen". Both of these definitions are applicable to the narrative and the character at hand. While trying to be tactful with the people around him, Desmond sometimes chooses not to listen to their requests or objections, showing metaphorical silence (which in the text can be expressed through a choice to talk rather than to listen) as opposed to the literal silence surrounding him most of the time. In this respect, unwillingness to listen turns into unwillingness to speak for Desmond, which, according to Butler, is an act of self-preservation (11).

The world changes for Desmond when he starts to lose his hearing. He has not only to adjust to the new way of perceiving and experiencing life, but also to the new modes of interacting with the world, people and places. Even though disability theoreticians argue that "deafness becomes disabling through social conditions and need not be inherently problematic or undesirable" (*Reading Victorian Deafness* 7), it is clear that for Desmond deafness is a threatening kind of silence. The spaces that surround him change when affected by his state and become threatening in their silence:

It was the middle of the afternoon, when most residents would be at work, but the near-silence seemed eerie in the middle of this city of over half a million people; indeed the city itself looked unfamiliar seen from this angle. [...] The unnatural quiet, I suddenly realised, was enhanced by the fact that I wasn't wearing my hearing aid. I prefer to drive without it when I'm on my own because it makes my four-year-old Ford Focus seem as noiseless as a Mercedes (*Deaf Sentence* 84-85)

While Desmond jokingly admits that there must be some advantages to his condition, it significantly influences his perception, turning his experience of space into a more negative one. Even though Desmond

maintains that in general “deafness is comic, as blindness is tragic” (*Deaf Sentence* 289), deafness is obviously both comic and tragic for him, with the emphasis on the latter. While deafness can be used to produce comedic effect (and the text utilises its comedic possibilities to a great extent), it is still a threat to Desmond’s well-being, to his ability to interact with the world, as well as to his public face. The contrast between the sounds and noises of the world around Desmond and his subjective growing silence of it create a conflict he is incapable of addressing or solving immediately, which significantly affects his quality of life.

The two strategies Desmond uses to avoid the threatening effects of silence, removing himself from the conversation and engaging in it excessively, serve the same purpose - to avoid the loss of public face in the social situations imposed on him by the places he occupies at any given moment.

Unfortunately for Desmond, his home does not always serve as a safe space for him either. His wife, Fred, is keen on organising parties and inviting friends to the house, exposing Desmond to the same discomfort as other social events do. Social situations even outside the university posit threat to Desmond’s public face, so he has to recur to the strategies similar to the ones he tended to use at the university.

It is important to note that home, conventionally regarded as a safe haven, a “safe space” of sorts, is a volatile space for him. Home changes characteristics depending on the social situation and, hence, on the proportion of noise and silence — sometimes Desmond needs to self-censor, as people’s presence becomes a threat to his public face. As he tries to ignore his condition by being excessively communicative, the seemingly subjective silence of his increasing deafness starts affecting everyone around him, and, as it comes full circle, returns to him in the form of further humiliation.

Even though, conventionally, domestic spaces are expected to satisfy one’s need for quiet and comfort by being stable and predictable (Dovey 37), Desmond is faced with the reality of Fred’s social events that invade his privacy and call for his participation, all of which, again, increases his longing for silence and solitude, and, along with the predictable need for avoidance of public places, the construction of privacy within his own home becomes a priority and a sometimes unreachable luxury for him.

The loss of hearing for him also means the loss of (or a threat to) his authority at his workplace. A university is by definition a space that requires interaction between people — it is the space where knowledge is shared, mainly verbally, and where it is important to maintain

contact with both students and colleagues. Desmond, however, “found himself struggling to pick up the gist of an argument, falling silent, afraid to intervene in case he had got the wrong end of the stick, eventually giving up altogether and falling into a bored reverie” (*Deaf Sentence* 26) during the meetings of his Department. This act of self-censorship which is usually performed “out of respect for the feelings of others, but most often from the fear of punishment or loss of face” (Stroinska 97) lead him into a position of an outsider — not being able to either speak or listen, he lost his power as a member of the collective. The university becomes the space of constant stress and inability to follow certain conventions and rules of conduct, the space that eventually silences Desmond into early retirement:

He was finding teaching increasingly difficult because of his deafness — not just in seminars, but when giving lectures too, because he believed in interactive lecturing. [...] He encouraged students to raise their hands in the middle of his lectures if they didn’t understand something, and he would ask them questions himself occasionally to keep them on their toes, but the method depended on his being able to hear them, so he used it less and less as time went on (*Deaf Sentence* 26)

If in the meetings with his colleagues Desmond eventually chooses self-censorship, silencing himself, as the only possible behaviour, when it comes to his classes he adopts an altogether different approach, “he was talking far too much himself because it was easier than straining to hear what the students were saying” (*Deaf Sentence* 26). The second definition of deafness, “unwillingness to listen”, manifests itself here being a defence mechanism that Desmond uses to avoid the need to change his teaching methods, potential misunderstanding, and, ultimately, humiliation.

The statement below not only describes Desmond’s behaviour in public spaces and social situations, but also reflects the overall way the narrative is presented to the reader:

When you can’t hear what people are saying you have two options: you can either keep quiet and nod and murmur and smile, pretending that you are hearing what your interlocutor is saying, throwing in the odd word of agreement, but always in danger of getting the wrong end of the stick, with potentially embarrassing consequences; or alternatively, you can seize the initiative, ignore the normal rules of conversational turn-taking, and talk non-stop on a subject of your own choosing without letting the other person get a word in edge-ways, so that the problem of hearing and understanding what they are saying doesn’t arise (*Deaf Sentence* 186)

Both of these strategies essentially describe the respective definitions of deafness — the incapacity and the unwillingness to listen. The narrative itself is a collection of Desmond's diary entries, a monologue about the inability to listen, a monologue that does not require an active listener, and that, when presented as a book, leaves the reader incapable of giving a response.

Simultaneously, it gives a possibility to equate sound and silence rather than present them as a binary: although it can be argued that silence and noise (or, in this instance, speech) are opposites, it seems possible to say that “in particular circumstances silence and certain forms of speech are functional equivalents” (Szuchewicz, 247). While the original research on such a merging of functions claims that silence becomes an act of “speech” when it is loaded with meaning, it seems feasible that a reverse situation can occur, when speech can be so void of meaning that it becomes equivalent to silence.

The range of places where Desmond can experience comfort and security narrows down day to day, and his condition eventually limits him to the communication almost exclusively with those people who are aware of his problem and can act accordingly. The following excerpt illustrates how the inability to communicate on a sufficient level brings Desmond to solitude and the one place in his house that usually does not require communication with others:

Fred: Why did you say ‘All right’ if you didn’t hear what I said?

Me: Let me get my hearing aid.

Fred: No, don’t bother. It’s not important.

We drove the rest of the way home in silence. I went to my study to put a new battery in my right earpiece, or ‘hearing instrument’ as the User’s Guide rather grandiloquently calls it (*Deaf Sentence 8*)

Following this early indication of the comfort of his study is a number of instances when it is mentioned as a refuge, a place he resorts to in need of security. Eventually Desmond realises that his study is the only safe and quiet space in his house, which is also a place of “recharge”, both literally — he keeps batteries for his hearing aid in his desk’s drawer — and metaphorically. Desmond’s comfort zone narrows down, as the juxtaposition of silence perceived by him and the objective noise of the surrounding spaces create a threatening contrast which can only be resolved by avoidance of any sound. The silence and the lack of need to communicate seem more and more inviting to him and such that can provide a certain level of introspection (after all, this is where he writes his diary entries that the novel consists of) and production of meaning.

His attitude to this place changes throughout the novel as he realises not only the situational importance but also the necessity of solitude and silence, regardless of his condition:

I was desperate for some peace and quiet, longing to prise the hearing aids, which I had been wearing all day, out of my hot, sweaty earholes, and to enjoy a spell of silence. So after about a quarter of an hour I pretended that I was going to go to bed [...] and slunk back downstairs to my study (*Deaf Sentence* 174)

Desmond's relationship with other spaces within the house is linked to his relationship with his wife, and very often it means that these spaces cannot provide comfort or security for him, he needs to interact with guests in the living room, he "can only listen to the kitchen radio when [he is] alone in the house because [he has] to have the volume turned up so high" (*Deaf Sentence* 24). Desmond and his wife drift further apart, especially as he notices that she starts using his conversational strategies of speaking rather than listening "all so that she doesn't have to engage in a proper conversation with me" (*Deaf Sentence* 232). As a result of this, the study comes to be perceived as the only "home" within the house (that itself belongs to his wife too).

Desmond by now chooses the silence of his study over any other setting, in much contrast with the beginning of the novel when he feared it and found his growing deafness highly inconvenient and threatening to his social well-being. He rejects social interaction and chooses the objective silence of his study, confines himself in the limited space of solitude and introspection. Such a shift from subjective silence of his condition to the objective silence of the absence of noise can be an indication of two opposing processes: on the one hand, it can be an indication of Desmond's deeper (or different) understanding of the nature of silence and better appreciation of it, but on the other hand, in a slightly negative tone, it can be an escape from the sound and noise altogether because of the increasing levels of discomfort and the fear of it.

The final step in Desmond's coming to terms with silence is his visit to what he calls "the landscape of death" (*Deaf Sentence* 256), the Auschwitz concentration camp. The silence of this place is different to any other that Desmond has experienced so far, and the space around him changes his perception of silence and, subsequently, his understanding of his condition — Desmond's resistance to silence turns into appreciation of it:

Normally in such a situation I would have removed my hearing aid to give

my ears some relief; but I kept the earpieces in, because I wanted to hear the silence, a silence broken only by the crunch of my shoes on the frozen snow, the occasional sound of a dog barking in the distance, and the mournful whistle of a train (*Deaf Sentence* 255)

Even though “most visitors coming to Auschwitz for the first time note that the effect of seeing the material legacy of the camp’s past is the most powerful and devastating part of their trip” (Tumarkin 136), the silence of the place is no less significant. Auschwitz in the context of the novel is best described as a *traumascape*, a “place [...] transformed physically and psychically by suffering” (Tumarkin 13), a kind of space that draws visitors to itself by the power of the collective traumatic event that happened there. Such places usually have a set of common characteristics one of which is an ability to serve as a therapeutic setting for those suffering from trauma (Tumarkin 153). It is a space that urges self-reflection and crystallisation of one’s feelings and thoughts (Tumarkin 36), and in this light, Desmond’s readiness to embrace the silence around him serves as his answer to the challenges he is faced with on two levels.

It is, on the one hand, the moment Desmond comes to terms with his condition, as now, in opposition to his previous urge to take off his hearing aid as soon as possible, he welcomes the sound and, more importantly, the silence of the world around him. The importance of silence and its meaningfulness are now especially explicit. On the other hand, the place marked by the permanent presence of loss (Tumarkin 79) is the one that also gives resolution to Desmond’s worries about the death of his first wife and the inevitable death of his father. The silence of Auschwitz is a reverence reserved for the dead, and for Desmond the absence of sound is tantamount to the absence of the people he lost (or, as he understands, will lose). The silence of death is, however, not frightful for him, as the “cathartic experience [of the *traumascape* provides not only a] release from the burden of the traumatic past, but also of the anxious and uncertain present” (Tumarkin 53), and that allows Desmond to re-evaluate his experiences and re-establish his position in and understanding of the world.

Thus, the visit to Auschwitz and the experience of its silence becomes a formative event for Desmond, an event that completes his venture into the understanding of his condition, his attitude to life and death and, possibly, gives him a better comprehension of his future. The novel concludes with Desmond’s return to the lip-reading classes he was dismissive of at the beginning of the story, signifying his readiness to face his health problem and solve it, at least in a way, while not being afraid of silence any more.

While *Deaf Sentence* explores the themes of silence and deafness to the greatest extent among the works of David Lodge, it is possible to say that the experience of silence, be it objective or subjective, is an important part of multiple novels by Lodge. His characters are exposed to it or use it to their advantage, try to avoid it or face it to overcome misunderstanding or their fears. Silence is an essential part of the binary logic with sound being its opposite, since one cannot exist without the other: “silence is a fundamental part of the dialectic between talking and not talking, between activity and passivity, that forms the basis for the speech economy: without silence there is no rhythm” (Olsson 107). David Lodge creates and curates this rhythm in his novels by both describing silences as parts of his characters’ speech patterns and by including silences into the descriptions of spaces his characters experience.

The balance of sound and silence in the spaces of Lodge’s characters creates additional meanings, allows the reader to explore the characters’ motivations and gives insight into the internal structure of the fictional worlds they live in — the way their social lives are constructed, the relationship they have with spaces they occupy and their understanding of the spiritual realm. While such insights can be found in *The Picturegoers*, *The British Museum Is Falling Down*, *Therapy* and other novels written by David Lodge, *Deaf Sentence* explores the relations between people, spaces and silences to the greatest extent.

The silences perceived by Desmond Bates are polysemantic and multifunctional. They represent Desmond’s personal challenges on both literal and symbolic levels, providing an insight into the character’s understanding of the world and his development throughout the novel. While silence of deafness is, clearly, a challenge for Desmond, it also provides him with better understanding of and a possibility to re-evaluate his attitude to social life, privacy and death. And since silences around Desmond are linked to the spaces he lives in and visits, the interdependence of the two is of utmost importance for the understanding of the character’s background and motivations.

The inability to participate in social events stemming from Desmond’s condition draws him away from public spaces, and even the privacy of his home becomes uncomfortable because of the need to share the space with his wife and occasional guests. Desmond’s active avoidance of spaces and situations that require interaction with people leads to his voluntary exclusion from social life in the majority of its forms: workplace communication, visits, family events, and the like. Both personal and public spaces (that Desmond experiences differently

depending on the sound-silence ratio throughout the novel) alter their importance and the role played in his life to give space to the silence of solitude. Desmond's experience of a traumascap of Auschwitz, however, helps him reassess his relationship with silence and find a way to cope with his own traumatic experiences, thus revoking the need to self-censor and self-isolate.

The spaces and their silences play an important role in the way the characters are built and developed in *Deaf Sentence* and other novels by Lodge. The silence of the library in *The British Museum Is Falling Down* aids in imposing the rules on those inside, the quiet of streets in *The Picturegoers* gives better understanding of the atmosphere of the urban soundscape and creates suspense, and broken silence changes the power relations of a military institution in *Ginger, You're Barmy*. All these instances provide an understanding of the multiplicity of meanings of silence and the variety of ways David Lodge employs it to characterise people and spaces people live, work and communicate in.

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