

Hearing is Deafening: Communication in “Pierre and Camille”

The struggle to share and communicate our thoughts and feelings with others is a struggle that all humans wrestle with. Our minds and bodies often speak a different language than the one we make explicit. In Alfred de Musset’s short story “Pierre and Camille,” Monsieur des Arcis and Cecile grow distant when they discover that their daughter, Camille, is deaf. Cecile has a strong maternal bond with her daughter despite her deafness, but Monsieur des Arcis cannot overcome the graveness of his “misfortune.” During the time Monsieur des Arcis neglects his family to deal with business matters in Holland, Cecile drowns but Camille is saved and taken in by her Uncle Giraud who takes her to Paris to distract her from her grief. It is in Paris where she falls in love with Pierre, a privileged and educated deaf man who teaches her how to write and with whom she ultimately has a hearing child. This story makes readers wonder about the different ways we communicate and fail to communicate with each other whether deaf or hearing. Monsieur des Arcis, Cecile, and Camille all experience an unarticulated sorrow that drives them apart as opposed to bringing them together. “Pierre and Camille” illustrates the nuanced complexities of communication and suggests that one’s ability to communicate is not physically determined.

Monsieur des Arcis and Cecile’s reluctance to address their sadness suggests that their relationship was troublesome from the start. Their failure to discuss Monsieur des Arcis’s past trauma and overwhelming sadness and instead repress it is arguably what makes their marriage fall apart before Cecile’s death: “Monsieur des Arcis was no less gentle and kind than his wife; but the passions of his youth and the experience he seemed to have had with the affairs of this world, at times rendered him melancholy... Although on this subject she [Cecile] neither reflected nor thought deeply, her heart readily taught her not to complain of those light clouds

that destroy all happiness as soon as they are noticed, and which amount to nothing if allowed to pass” (9). Even though Cecile recognizes that her husband struggles with his mental health, she decides to remain in denial about it and wait for his sadness to pass into a short-lived happiness. It is significant that Alfred de Musset begins his story with this because it suggests that Monsieur des Arcis’s anguish is rooted deeper than the remorse he feels over the birth of his deaf daughter. Although Monsieur des Arcis is presented as a mostly unsympathetic father to Camille, it is possible that his empathy for his daughter was in fact too strong for him to bear, that he could not stand the thought of his daughter being an outcast like himself. However, the uncommunicative nature of their marriage makes them susceptible to misunderstanding each other.

Cecile also has difficulty expressing her sorrow that comes from her feeling like she is insufficient as both a mother and a wife. When her husband tells her about him having to go abroad for business, “... she could only answer with those commonplace remarks that one always has on the tip of one’s tongue when one cannot express one’s thoughts... While she spoke, her heart was full of sorrow; she said she felt tired, and sat upon a bench... Her marriage had been quite an unexpected happiness, entirely a new feeling; a light had flashed before her eyes in the midst of long, dreary days, and now darkness was again coming upon her” (23). The lack of communication between Cecile and her husband is equated with a faltering passion for each other. Even though they both feel a similar sense of doom in regards to their marriage, neither chooses to confront it and instead they both diverge and seek shelter and solace in the shadows of solitude as if they are repenting for their sins. Even though Cecile and her husband both experience similar feelings of gloom and misery and they are both hearing, they do not know how to communicate with each other or to express their needs.

While Monsieur des Arcis and Cecile suffer in silence, Camille suffers aloud and makes her grief palpable. After her mother sacrifices her life and drowns so that Camille can be taken across the river safely, Camille loses self-control in her deep sadness: “There was, in fact, something terrifying in this being whom they were accustomed to see mute, gentle, and tranquil, and who suddenly emerged from her silence in the presence of death... They were neither words nor sobs, but a kind of horrible language which seemed to have been invented by sorrow” (33). The fact that a deaf character who is not able to speak, or at least form coherent words, is more communicative than the hearing characters in the story suggests that communication is more than ascribing words to feelings and that deaf people also experience a world of emotion. All of the main characters suffer through a sorrow that transcends language, yet Camille is able to communicate this ineffable sorrow most directly. While Cecile and Monsieur des Arcis appear to feel shame at their sadness and withdraw into themselves to attempt to disguise and repress it, Camille tries to cleanse herself of it by allowing it to inundate and flow out of her. Perhaps one could even argue that it is Camille’s deafness that allows her to be even more self-aware and expressive than the hearing characters in the first place.

Cecile and Monsieur des Arcis’s taciturn relationship is contrasted with Camille and Pierre’s relationship that is founded upon an unspoken mutual understanding for each other. Camille and Pierre are even used to reimagine the western canon’s most classic love story: “If Romeo and Juliet, who had only seen each other one night at a masked ball, at their first meeting, could exchange so many vows, which were faithfully kept, let us imagine what might be the first gestures and glances of two lovers who could only tell each other by their actions, those same things, eternal before God, and which the genius of Shakespeare has immortalized on earth” (45). For Camille and Pierre who represent an honest and true love that is “eternal before God,”

the boundaries of communication are not limiting or hindering in their capacity to convey their love for each other. Alfred de Musset draws attention to the idea that communication is more fluid, varied, and malleable than hearing people may realize. At its core, communication is about being sensitive and receptive to our internal and external observations. If Camille's deafness is equated with an increased sense of introspection that the hearing characters lack, then that enables her to become one of the most eloquent characters in the story.

Alfred de Musset sets up a dichotomy between Cecile and Monsieur des Arcis's tragic relationship with that of Camille and Pierre's tender relationship to demonstrate that a person's capacity to communicate with others is not a matter of physical ability. Uncle Giraud defends Camille's deafness as a blessing in disguise when he says that "She will naturally know a very good thing, one which is ordinarily learned only with difficulty, and that is, that it is better to act than to talk" (16). The ability to hear and speak is often mistaken for the ability to properly communicate in our hearing-centric world, but the truth is that hearing the noises of the world can dull our ability to hear ourselves. Therefore, hearing is subverted as a form of deafness. Communication is an art of many forms that requires self-confrontation first and foremost. Only once someone is able to look within themselves can they successfully communicate with the world.