Arline Votruba

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Screaming Silence

During my freshman year of high school I took an English course that enticed me to delve into the world of words. I can vividly recall little old Mrs. Standring calling out over us as we worked on creative writing pieces, “Show me! Do not tell me!” She would stress this to us in every piece we wrote. She drilled into our brains the idea that often times it is what we do not say specifically within our stories that later resonates in the reader’s mind. As I quickly realized when I began *A Scrap of Time* by Ida Fink, this tactic is as true as Mrs. Standring had always promised. Intentionally leaving out certain details is an element present in a multitude of the short stories that Ida Fink shares with the world. The reader can see first hand that more times than not the unspoken word contributes to the implied purpose of the story, which leaves you with questions. *A Scrap of Time* holds dozens of timeless mysteries. Though Fink provokes curiosities that we may never find the answer to, now nearly 70 years after the war has ended, we have access to many answers to the questions provoked by her stories. Hardly believable, many of the stories imply atrocities without stating them directly, which strengthens the impact of the story on the reader.

“Jean-Christophe” is one of the many stories in *A Scrap of Time* that implies strongly what it does not blatantly state. Fink shapes her story just as strongly with what she does say as with what she does not. Immediately as the reader begins reading the lines of “Jean-Christophe”, Fink’s ability to make use of both spoken and unspoken words becomes apparent.

“Jean-Christophe” begins by dropping us into a scene. A group of people is working on the Ostbahn under the authority of an Aufseherin. Using specific terms such as these, without indicating directly what they mean, puzzles the reader. Ostbahn and Aufseherin are not defined, forcing us to find answers on our own. In order to open up the curiosity of the reader and in turn hopefully instigate the reader to do some research about the Holocaust that may result in a more thorough understanding of the complex situation we are faced with in the beginning of “Jean-Christophe”, Fink specifically neglects defining these terms. Instead of simply adding footnotes to clear up the confusion about the many German or Yiddish quotations within the book or use of jargon specific to the time of the Holocaust, Fink chooses to merely continue the story with an understanding that you will do the research yourself.

Sprinkled throughout the paragraphs of the story Fink revisits the idea of silence. While introducing the setting she states that the people were, “maybe eight kilometers outside of town, amid the silence of the trees” (Fink 31). Later on she again mentions how quiet the world was when she plainly says, “It was silent in the forest” (Fink 32). Not coincidentally, the final line of the story describes the oldest person working on the Ostbahn. The woman is kneeling down while putting her ear to the earth and Fink closes the story with, “But the earth was still silent” (Fink 34). In “Jean-Christophe”, Fink carefully constructs her story by paying attention to which details she leaves out. While she continues to mention the silence, she also indicates that the place where these people are sitting awaiting the train is not in fact silent. Details such as, “We could hear the soft, steady rustle of pages being turned,” or “The girl who had been crying was now sobbing louder,” prove that it was not literally silent (Fink 33). This is part of Fink’s brilliance. What she is not saying is what she intends for us to hear from this story. The unbreakable silence of the earth is a metaphor for the injustice of the time during which this story takes place. Not a single voice spoke up on behalf of these people who were awaiting the sound that would indicate that their time of death had arrived. Although the pages turned and the woman cried, the world itself made no sound.

Choosing to leave the silence undefined, Fink elicits several potential responses from the reader. The silence may be interpreted as the world refraining from stopping the unjust murder of Jewish people. Without specifically telling us what she means by the silence, Fink opens the truth up to a matter of interpretation. The silence could also be said to be a symbol of the Jews themselves, silenced by the realization that they were already dead. Clearly Fink’s decision to leave certain details out of the story creates an opportunity for many reactions and interpretations, which signifies the era she is writing about perfectly as it was a time of chaotic perplexity.

With very few words Fink successfully conveys her major intentions within the stories in *A Scrap of Time*. Deliberately choosing to leave out some details and merely implying them is what makes “Jean-Christophe” such a powerfully effective and woeful story. The power of words is incredible, but Fink proves that sometimes the power of silence is greater.

Works Cited

Fink, Ida, Madeline G. Levine, and Francine Prose. *A Scrap of Time and Other Stories*. New York: Pantheon, 1987. Print.