Sound and Silence: A Psychoanalytic Analysis of "The Medium"

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SOUND AND SILENCE:
A PSYCHOANALYTIC ANALYSIS
OF THE MEDIUM

Margaret McCurry

“A Mute is one that acteth speakingly…” – Brome, The Antipodes v. 4

The art of theatre relies heavily upon both visual and auditory cues to inspire emotions in the audience. So vital is the role of auditory perception to audiences that the origins of the word “audience” can be traced back to the fourteenth century Old French word, *audience* (“the act or state of hearing, action or condition of listening”), which developed from the Latin *audentia* (“a hearing, listening”) (Harper). Opera, in particular, relies even more heavily upon sound for audience members to understand the texts, meanings, and emotions. When the curtain rises, audiences anticipate that they will hear something. What significance, then, does an opera with a mute character hold—a character who auditorily conveys nothing?

In this paper, I wish to explore the dialectic of sound and silence in Gian Carlo Menotti’s opera, *The Medium*, by introducing several interrelated psychoanalytic theories and proposing possibilities as to the significance of these binary phenomena. The opera features two auditory anomalies: a mute character and sourceless, haunting echoes. After providing summaries of Act I and Act II, I will analyze the historical

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relationship between muteness and melodrama. Next, I will explore “Monica’s Waltz,” the opening scene of Act II, in which Monica, Baba’s daughter, sings to Toby, a mute gypsy boy, and then “sings” his responses for him. This scene exemplifies the semiotic elements of Toby’s communication and captures the quintessence of the melodramatic features of the opera as a whole. After this, I will provide a summary of Julia Kristeva’s theory of semiotic language and I will use the philosophy of Cathy Caruth to study the echoes that haunt Baba, each voice representing a Caruthian “voice that cries out,” for which I argue is Toby’s traumatic “voice.” Finally, I will conclude the paper by placing these ideas in conversation with Sigmund Freud’s research regarding the uncanny.

**Act I: “A Cold, Cold Hand”**

The entirety of the two-act opera takes place in the parlor of Baba, a woman who conducts routine séances under the alias of Madame Flora. Act I opens as Monica plays make-believe with Toby, dressing him in silks of brilliant colors. Baba arrives, inebriated, and reprimands Toby for touching her things. Soon thereafter, three guests arrive and a séance begins. Two of the guests, Mr. and Mrs. Gobineau communicate with an entity they believe to be their son. Because he died at the age of two, he is unable to speak to them and only laughs. Mrs. Nolan, the third guest, experiences a séance for the first time. She seeks to connect with her teenage daughter, who comforts Mrs. Nolan (“Mummy, Mummy dear, you must not cry for me”). What the guests do not realize, however, is that Monica is responsible for the responses of the dead—she imitates the laughter of the Gobineau child and she sings replies to Mrs. Nolan into a microphone behind a curtain. As the séance draws to a close, Baba feels a hand around her throat

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3 Caruth, Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2016), 3
(“[A]ll of a sudden in the dark I felt on my throat a hand — A cold, cold hand. It wasn’t the hand of a man. Monica, I’m afraid!”5 She accuses Toby of trying to kill her (“Where is Toby? He! He’s the one! I know now! He did it!”)6 Act I ends with Monica comforting Baba, who frantically counts on her rosary and begs for God’s forgiveness. Suddenly, they hear a voice coming from offstage—Monica’s voice—singing the “Mother, mother, are you there?” leitmotif that Monica sang to Mrs. Nolan. This frightens Monica and Baba even more, since it is obvious that this time, it is not Monica who is singing the refrain.

Act II: The Emergence of Toby’s Voice

Act II begins with “Monica’s Waltz” as Toby puts on a puppet show for Monica. Enraptured by her fantasies, Monica sings and dances to her waltz, and begins to include Toby in the realm of her imagination. She sings of her love for Toby in the form of a duet, singing not only her part, but Toby’s responses to her as well. Baba, drunk, arrives with a slam of the door. She confronts Toby and tries to force him to admit that he was the one who touched her throat. She bribes him with costumes and even with Monica’s hand in marriage, but ultimately resorts to physical abuse. The doorbell rings and the patrons return. Still frightened from the hand she felt around her throat, Baba confesses to her patrons that she has been conniving them and attempts to pay them back. The patrons beg her to continue the séances, since the connections with their children are all they have to hold on to (“Please let us have our séance, Madame Flora! Just let us hear it once more, Madame Flora! This is the only joy we have in our lives, Madame Flora!”7 They leave reluctantly. Baba again accuses Toby and

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5 Ibid., 44-45.
6 Ibid., 46-47.
7 Ibid., 95-96.
forces him to leave the house. He returns during the night and is drawn towards the trunk where Baba keeps her costumes. When he accidentally slams the lid of the trunk shut, Baba wakes up from her drunken sleep. She grabs a gun to protect herself against what she believes to be the spirit that has been haunting her. Baba sees movement within the puppet theater and shoots into it, killing Toby. The curtain falls as Baba bends over Toby’s lifeless body and whispers, “Was it you? Was it you?”

The Melodrama of Muteness

While The Medium is unique in that it features a mute character in a performance that is fully sung, muteness is a theme that spans broadly across the melodramatic genre. In “The Mute's Voice: The Dramatic Transformations of the Mute and Deaf-Mute in Early-Nineteenth-Century France,” Patrick McDonagh examines the history behind the relationship between muteness and the melodrama. Although his research primarily focuses on the way in which historical accounts of muteness have been portrayed on the stage, his work can be applied to fictional accounts as well. McDonagh contextualizes the metaphorical relationship between the melodrama and its corresponding physical manifestations, explaining that the tragedy highlights blindness, with an emphasis on foresight, insight, and enlightenment; the comedy highlights deafness, with an emphasis on miscommunication and misunderstanding; and the melodrama highlights muteness, with an emphasis on verbal and emotional expression. Most significantly, the melodrama lends itself to what he calls “aesthetics of muteness,” meaning that mute characters must demonstrate

8 Ibid., 121.

what they mean physically while also metaphorically pointing toward meaning.¹⁰

What makes The Medium a melodrama? Besides “the intentional staging of danger and the subsequent heightened emotions,”¹¹ the mystery of the mute plays a part. The interrelated correspondences between the mute character, who traditionally holds the truths central to the play’s ideas and enigmas, with the marginalization of the mute creates a melodramatic atmosphere surrounding the recognition of the mute and the secrets he or she has to reveal. Toby’s presence raises questions of suspense that the audience struggles to answer throughout the opera: How did Toby become mute? What secrets does he withhold? Will he ever learn to speak? These questions incite anxieties and feelings of suspense in the audience. Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, associate professor of Musicology at Brooklyn College, explains: “The idea of muteness in fiction is exemplified . . . structurally by the predominance of gaps and textual ellipses, and thematically by an overriding concern with language, silence, speech, muteness, writing, and blankness.”¹² It is these very linguistic features that I wish to explore using Julia Kristeva’s theory of semiotic language.

Semiotic Language as an Alternative to Speech

As this paper relies so heavily upon Kristeva’s notion of semiotic language, it will be helpful to review this concept in detail before applying it to The Medium. In Revolutions in Poetic Language, Kristeva argues that all signification is articulated by the dialectic of two linguistic modes, the symbolic and the semiotic. She explains that the semiotic is the means

¹⁰ Ibid., 657.
¹¹ Ibid., 669.
¹² Jensen-Moulton, Stephanie, “‘What is it you want to tell me?’: Muteness and Masculinity in Menotti’s The Medium.” PhD diss., CUNY, 24.
by which humans express physical drives through prosodic linguistic features, including vocal modulations and even sphincteral activity.\textsuperscript{13} The \textit{semiotic} is expressed with the fluctuations and modulations within music, poetry, or rhythmic speech. As a companion to the \textit{semiotic}, the \textit{symbolic} is the means by which humans express their thoughts using concrete syntaxes that are defined by pre-existing, culturally constructed standards.\textsuperscript{14} Symbolic communication is expressed with sentences that abide by prescriptive grammatical rules. It is important to understand that the \textit{semiotic} and the \textit{symbolic} are \textit{inseparable} features of language. If the \textit{semiotic} acted in isolation, it would only contribute senseless babble; if the \textit{symbolic} acted in isolation, it would only contribute unmotivated speech. Without the dialectical oscillation between the \textit{semiotic} and the \textit{symbolic}, signification would not be possible.\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, these two linguistic modes are inseparable because they both exist within the conceptual systems of every speaker. Kristeva explains, “Because the subject is always both \textit{semiotic} and \textit{symbolic}, no signifying system he produces can be either “exclusively” \textit{semiotic} or “exclusively” \textit{symbolic}, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both.”\textsuperscript{16} All speaking subjects, and therefore, all linguistic utterances, are composed of semiotic features as well as symbolic features; the question is, to what extent?

Considering that Toby’s muteness bars him from complete access to the realm of the \textit{symbolic}, how does his linguistic approach fit within Kristeva’s theory of language? Toby’s muteness emphasizes his otherness through a twofold process: His physical disability inhibits him from fully participating in the production of language, and as a consequence,

\textsuperscript{13} Kristeva, Julie, \textit{Revolutions in Poetic Language}, (New York: Columbia, UP, 1984), 38.
\textsuperscript{14} Oliver, Kelly, \textit{The Portable Kristeva}, (New York: Columbia UP, 1997), xiv.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., xv.
\textsuperscript{16} Kristeva, \textit{Revolutions}, 34.
he is forced to seek alternative means of communication in the realm of the semiotic. The dialectic of sound and the absence of sound culminates in Toby’s semiotic expressions. Throughout the opera, we see him nod, point, knock, and meaningfully touch other characters. He also expresses himself abstractly with the costumes that he wears, with the puppets that he manipulates, and most interestingly, through the voices of the other characters. Toby enjoys dressing himself in Baba’s costumes—Act I opens as Toby dresses himself and Monica chides him, reminding him that “you know [Baba will] beat you if you touch her things,” indicating that this is a circumstance that has taken place in the past. Predictably, Baba’s first lines, sung when she catches Toby handling the costumes, are “How many times I’ve told you not to touch my things! Look at you! Dressed with silk and bangles like a woman! Fancying yourself a King or something? Stop dreaming, you feeble-minded gipsy! I told you not to touch my things!” Later in the opera, Baba offers these very “things” in exchange for a confession, singing, “You like that bolt of red silk, don’t you? Would you like to have it? Also the necklace of beads? All you have to make is one little sign, and they will be yours.” Additionally, Toby expresses himself semiotically with the puppets he operates. Because Toby cannot control his surroundings, he finds pleasure in manipulating the puppets as a means of acting out his desires. In fact, the puppet theater is where he retreats when Baba threatens to shoot him at the end of the opera. He runs there for protection and control, but it cannot offer him the safety he desires. Like him, the puppets are

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18 Ibid., 71.
19 Ibid., 116.
20 Ibid., 66.
21 Ibid., 4.
22 Ibid., 8.
23 Ibid., 77-78.
voiceless, and like him as well, they are manipulated by forces outside of their control.

Paradoxically, the most important linguistic contributions that Toby makes are his silences. As Jensen-Moulton explains, "[S]ince he does not sign or communicate beyond nodding, miming, and his own expressive face, Toby’s language consists entirely of actions and reactions, and essentially, of silences."24 Indeed, the notion of a mute character in an opera is almost oxymoronic. When it is Toby’s turn to participate in the sung conversations among characters, something interesting happens—the music “speaks” for him through “rests, gaps of vertical dissonance, and one-sided recitatives over sustained single pitches.”25 I wish to explore the way that Toby’s linguistic expressions are shaped by Menotti’s music—either through the orchestral accompaniment or through the vocal lines of the other characters. An analysis of the musical features within “Monica’s Waltz” reveals that the scene is entirely contingent upon the semiotic melodrama of Toby’s disability.

Monica’s Waltz: “What is it you want to tell me?”

Swept away by her fantasies, Monica begins her Waltz by describing the instruments, the dress of the dancers, and the supernatural elements of the dance. She takes Toby’s hands, pulling him into her circle and inviting him to dance with her. The Waltz comes to a sudden stop when Toby grabs Monica’s arm. The stage directions over measure 27 indicate, “Toby seizes Monica abruptly by the arm. She turns and looks

25 Ibid., 24.
at him in complete astonishment,” precisely when the orchestra plays a C-D dyad over an A-flat octave. Monica asks, “What is the matter, Toby? What is it you want to tell me?”

Of course, Toby cannot reply to this question within Monica’s symbolic realm. As a result, he demonstrates the semiotic in its purest form—through music. The orchestral accompaniment offers a musical response to Monica—a plaintive, three measure motif, adagio molto espressivo, slightly faster and more expressive, and ma intenso e un poco rubato, more intense, with slight disregard to tempo in order to express more intimately. This passage underscores Toby’s gestures as he struggles to “find the words to speak,” semiotically speaking (see Figure 2, Appendix B).

In response, Monica commands Toby to kneel as she moves behind him and adopts his stance. In this position, Monica “sings” for Toby, exclaiming, “Monica, Monica, can’t you see, that my heart is bleeding, bleeding for you? I loved you Monica, all my life, with all my breath, with all my blood,” expressing the words that she believes he is trying to say—or, at least, the words that she wishes he would say. This bizarre, one-sided exchange of vows puts Toby in a subjugated position, both by what Monica says and, even more so, how she says it. As Jensen-Moulton so astutely observes, “If Toby were not a mute character, surely he would be the one asking Monica to dance the waltz, but Monica is already putting words into Toby’s mouth, both literally and figuratively.”

As the music of the Waltz continues to swell and the tempo accelerates poco ritenuto poi subito animando, Monica’s vocal lines ascend and the orchestra’s lines descend simultaneously, culminating at a fortississimo dynamic. Then, the

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27 Ibid., 65.
28 Ibid., 66.
29 Ibid., 66.
30 Jensen-Moulton, “Muteness and Masculinity” 30.
orchestra quickly interjects a fortepiano C# minor triad while a B-C# dyad is held with a fermata, as Toby’s stage directions indicate that he is to hide his face into his arms.\(^{31}\) (see Figure 3, Appendix B).

At this break, Monica’s trance is finally broken. She “stares at him, completely bewildered” and asks, “Why, Toby! You’re not crying, are you?”\(^{32}\) The Waltz theme resumes, teneramente and pianississimo, tenderly and very very softly. “With great tenderness”\(^{33}\) and with a moment of unexpected lucidity, Monica expresses the most poignant line in the entire opera: “Toby, I want you to know that you have the most beautiful voice in the world!”\(^{34}\) Julia Kristeva’s research posits that signifying practices, such as myth, poetry, and art, cannot be reduced to language objects.\(^{35}\) Correspondingly, “Monica’s Waltz,” with this touching line in particular, is full of significance that cannot be expressed in simplistic terms. Although the majority of “Monica’s Waltz” showcases Monica’s delusional trance, this singular declaration shows us that Monica truly cares for Toby and that she believes his semiotic “voice” to be more beautiful than any other symbolic “voice.”

“Monica’s Waltz,” as well as the entirety of The Medium, depicts a semiotic mode of communication through Toby’s deictic gestures, touches, expressions, and most importantly, the musical accompaniment itself. While the semiotic is Toby’s preferred mode of communication, we must not forget that the symbolic plays a role in the opera as well, as the interrelated natures of the semiotic and the symbolic are always a factor in any linguistic expression. While Toby privileges the semiotic, the world in which he lives privileges the symbolic, and any semiotic expression that Toby offers is met

\(^{31}\) Menotti, The Medium, 69.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., 69.
\(^{33}\) Ibid., 69.
\(^{34}\) Ibid., 70.
\(^{35}\) Kristeva, Revolutions, 32.
with responses that are comprised primarily of a symbolic nature. Toby’s reliance upon the semiotic makes for an enhanced operatic experience, as it expresses ideas in both the symbolic and semiotic modes. Furthermore, his command of semiotic language allows Menotti’s opera to embrace a full range of expression that cannot be accessed through the symbolic alone.

**The Trauma of Muteness**

Most interestingly, it is only after Baba accuses Toby that the echoes, originally produced by Monica, reappear without any traceable source. Monica’s cries of “Mother, Mother, are you there?” were originally used to enhance Mrs. Nolan’s séance experience. The score indicates that these refrains, as well as Monica’s imitation laughter of the Gobineau child, are to be sung by a “voice” off-stage. These echoes defy explanation; when she first hears them, Monica herself stops and asks “What?” while the echoes of her own voice repeat without her doing. What is the source of these echoes? Where do they come from? This “voice that cries out” demonstrates key components of Cathy Caruth’s theory on trauma.

Caruth posits that the force of trauma is intertwined with the violence of the unknowable—a violence that stems from “the inextricability of the story of one’s life from the story of a death, an impossible and necessary double telling.” This trauma is expressed through an unknowable voice, which tells the story of a former wound in an attempt to bring attention to an inaccessible reality expressed through a language that “defies, even as it claims, our understanding.” While this unknowable other can be worked through, it will never go

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37 Ibid., 56.
38 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 3.
39 Ibid., 8.
40 Ibid., 5.
away entirely and manifests itself into different traumatic expressions.\textsuperscript{41} Furthermore, the unconscious will prompt us to return to the same scene of our trauma so that we may better understand it,\textsuperscript{42} prompting a double wound.

As the opera unfolds, we learn more about Toby’s traumatic experiences. Baba references the way that she took him in, singing, “I found you, a little starving gipsy, roaming the streets of Budapest without a tongue to speak your hunger.”\textsuperscript{43} This gives us an indication of the trauma that Toby experienced before the opera even began. Jensen-Moulton proposes a possible explanation regarding Toby’s history: While the score indicates that \textit{The Medium} is to take place in “a squalid room in a flat on the outskirts of a great city,”\textsuperscript{44} Baba’s reference to Budapest suggests that the opera might take place in Budapest. Additionally, while the score indicates that the opera is to take place “in our time,”\textsuperscript{45} the nature of Toby’s disability suggests that the opera could take place in a setting with which Menotti would have been familiar—post-World War II Hungary.\textsuperscript{46} World War II left a high concentration of Roma (gypsies) in post-war Hungary. Believing the Roma to be racially inferior, the Nazis targeted them in a similar way as they targeted the Jews, subjecting them to “arbitrary internment, forced labor, and mass murder.”\textsuperscript{47} Therefore, it is very possible that German authorities cut out Toby’s tongue in an act of racial persecution.

While adopting Toby as her ward may paint Baba as a humanitarian, she is anything but; Toby’s exposure to traumatic violence does not end under Baba’s guardianship. After

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{43} Menotti, \textit{The Medium}, 73.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., i.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., i.
\textsuperscript{46} Jensen-Moulton, “Muteness and Masculinity,” 16.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 16.
Baba is spooked by the throat incident at the séance, she targets Toby as her scapegoat and tells Monica, “Just because he cannot speak we take him for a half-wit.” Later however, when Baba confronts Toby about the incident, she tells him, “If I hadn’t taken you with me, who would have cared for you, poor little half-wit?” The first of these references suggests that Baba realizes that Toby is more intelligent than she lets on and that his intelligence renders him capable of slyness. The second reference suggests that despite this knowledge, Baba regularly belittles Toby’s intellect as a means of subjugation and control.

The pivotal scene of abuse occurs when Baba demands from Toby an explanation for the supernatural hand she felt and the echoes she heard. She sings frantically, “But first you must tell me, did you have anything to do with what happened that night? Did you see anything? A light? A shape? Wake up! Did you? Stop staring at me! Did you?” At this point, “with uncontrolled fury,” the tempo suddenly slows poco ritenuto for dramatic effect, then quickens accelerando poco a poco fino al tempo primo, until it reaches the original tempo again. Baba stops singing and instead begins to yell, “Ah, so— You don’t want to answer. You’re trying to frighten me. I’ll show you, damn little gipsy, I’ll make you talk! I’ll make you talk! You cannot get away from me! I’ll make you spit out blood, I will. I’ll make you spit out blood!” The stage directions indicate, “She goes to the cupboard and brings out a long whip. Toby runs away from her in terror. She chases him around the table. Toby trips and falls near the couch.” At this point, Baba whips Toby in time to the dissonant chords

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48 Menotti, The Medium, 49.
49 Ibid., 73.
50 Ibid., 80-81.
51 Ibid., 81.
52 Ibid., 81-83.
53 Ibid., 82-83.
as she screams “So you won’t answer, eh!” six times. Of course Toby cannot answer—it is difficult for anyone to answer in the midst of physical abuse—and especially more so for someone who is mute.

At the climax of the play, Baba expels Toby from the home and orders Monica to her room. After Monica exits the stage, again a voice sings the “Mother, Mother, are you there?” refrain. While these voices haunt Baba, they constitute not her traumatic voice, but Toby’s—a “plea by an other who is asking to be seen and heard”. The manifestation of Toby’s trauma haunts Baba precisely because Baba is responsible for much of Toby’s trauma, and as Caruth maintains, “one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another.” Because Baba is driven insane by “the ghost” who touched her throat and who haunts her with Monica’s voice, this suggests that Toby’s trauma has been translated into Baba’s own trauma. Caruth maintains, “Knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma”; because Baba doesn’t know who the “ghost” is, and because she doesn’t understand where the echoes come from, what began as Toby’s trauma has become hers as well.

At the end of the opera, Toby reenters the house and sneaks to the trunk where Baba’s costumes are kept. He accidentally slams the lid of the trunk shut. Baba wakes up in a panic and asks, “Who’s there? Who’s there? Answer me!” She arms herself with a gun for self-protection and continues to demand a response, crying, “Speak out or I’ll shoot! I’ll shoot! I’ll shoot!” Toby, of course, cannot “answer,” nor can

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54 Ibid., 83-84.
55 Ibid., 105.
56 Caruth, Unclaimed Experience, 9.
57 Ibid., 8.
58 Ibid., 4.
59 Menotti, The Medium, 117.
60 Ibid., 118.
he “speak out.” When he moves behind the puppet theater, Baba sees the curtain of the theater move and shoots into it, killing him. The final moments of the opera feature Baba on her knees, leaning over Toby’s body, whispering, “Was it you?” Baba’s question phrases the truth that she wants to extract from the mute Toby—whether or not the supernatural echoes were of his doing. The reality is that it was Toby’s doing—indirectly. When Baba cries, “I’ve killed the ghost!”, she isn’t referring to a ghost in the traditional sense of the word; she refers to the manifestation of Toby’s trauma, which haunts her and drives her to near insanity.

Toby’s story conveys trauma not just as a series of uncanny, unknowable repetitions, but as a witness to the unknowable otherness of the wounded, inner voice that longs to bring attention to the trauma that has not been reconciled. Because Toby’s manifestations of trauma are intertwined with Baba’s psyche, one might ask if the traumatic elements within The Medium stem from Toby’s abuse and death, or from Baba’s administration of pain upon him and her subsequent experiences with the manifestations of his past violent experiences? Caruth, who suggests “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival,” might argue that the traumatic elements of the opera stem from the intertwined relationship of trauma that Toby and Baba share.

The Haunting Uncanniness of the Voice

Because the theories of Julia Kristeva and Cathy Caruth stem from the psychoanalytic genealogy of Sigmund

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61 Ibid., 121.
62 Ibid., 119.
63 Caruth, Unclaimed Experience, 3.
64 Ibid., 7.
Freud, I would like to conclude my paper with an application of his 1919 essay, “Das Unheimliche” (“The Uncanny”). Freud defines the word “uncanny” (unheimlich) by explaining, “[W]hat is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar.”\footnote{Freud, Sigmund, “The Uncanny.” Literary Theory: An Anthology. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 118.} He goes on to explain that while many situations can be uncanny, the idea of the “double,” that is, when “there is the constant recurrence of similar situations, a same face, or character trait, or twist of fortune, or a same crime,”\footnote{Ibid., 425.} situations become extremely haunting. This \textit{déjà vu}, the “recurrence of similar situations” is precisely what takes place within \textit{The Medium}. While the opera takes place in the comfort of the domestic sphere, the sourceless echoes that repeat throughout the opera are unfamiliar, unexplainable, and therefore uncanny, which destabilizes the familiarity of the home and renders it an unsettling setting.

It is not the occult itself that frightens Baba; what frightens her, rather, is knowledge of the reality of the supernatural, a reality that she previously devalued. In an attempt to find a natural explanation for the sourceless echoes, Baba targets Toby as the scapegoat and cries, “[H]e knows a great deal. He knows much more than we think. There is something uncanny about him. He sees things we don’t see.”\footnote{Menotti, The Medium, 49, emphasis added} Although Baba is experienced with the occult (or, at least, convincing her patrons that she is experienced with the occult), the sourceless echoes lead her to fully believe in the paranormal. As a result, by the end of the opera, she believes that Toby in particular has direct access to the realm of the supernatural.

The feeling of uncanniness detected by the characters in the opera permeates into the audience as well. Freud writes, “It is true that the writer creates a kind of uncertainty in us [the
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audience] in the beginning by not letting us know, no doubt purposely, whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one of his own creation." When the mysterious echoes begin to haunt Baba, it is difficult for the audience to ascertain whether or not they are simply the product of her own imagination. When the other characters also hear the echoes, however, we realize that these echoes are not merely the manifestation of Baba’s psychosis; something much more sinister is at play which threatens all the characters. Freud continues, acknowledging, “He [the composer] has, of course, a right to do either; and if he chooses to stage his action in a world peopled with spirits, demons, and ghosts . . . we must bow to his decision and treat his setting as though it were real for as long as we put ourselves into his hands.”

The Medium would be uncanny enough if Baba was the only one who heard echoed voices in her head; but by bringing these echoes into the realm of realism so that the echoes are heard by all significantly raises the level of uncanniness.

Privileging Semiotic Language, its Trauma, and its Uncanniness

The psychoanalytic significance of The Medium lies within Toby in both his disability that lends itself to a privileging of semiotic language, as well as his past and present trauma. The Medium is a text that readily lends itself to a thorough psychoanalytic reading. Perhaps this is because Menotti believed the opera to be:

a play of ideas. It describes the tragedy of a woman caught between two worlds, a world of reality, which she cannot wholly comprehend, and a supernatural world, in which she cannot believe. Every character in

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69 Ibid., 423.
it has symbolic dimensions: Baba of Doubt, the three clients of Faith, Monica of Love and Toby of the Unknown.70

Menotti’s interpretation of his own opera may be the reason why The Medium can be placed in conversation with psychoanalytic texts with such ease. I disagree, however, with Menotti’s claim that Toby is simply a symbol of the Unknown. While it is true that his characterization as a mute establishes him as a pivotal symbolic figure in the opera, we must not forget that he is a multi-dimensional character—he is more than his disability and he is more than his symbolic value. Because Toby’s disability has forced him to privilege the semiotic and because his trauma has manifested itself on the stage, Toby, as well as The Medium itself, is multi-expressional.

70 Jensen-Moulton 18, “Muteness and Masculinity,” as quoted in Gruen 69.
Appendix A

Text to “Monica’s Waltz”

Bravo! And after the theater, supper and dance.  
Music! Um-pa-pa, um-pa-pa,  
Up in the sky someone is playing a trombone and a guitar.  
Red is your tie, and in your velventine coat you hide a star.  
Monica, Monica, dance the waltz,  
Monica, Monica, dance the waltz,  
Follow me, moon and sun,  
Keep time with me, one-two-three-one.  
If you’re not shy, pin up my hair with your star, and buckle my shoe.  
And when you fly, please hold on tight to my waist,  
I’m flying with you.  
O, Monica, Monica, dance the waltz,  
Monica, Monica, dance the waltz,  
Follow me, moon and sun,  
Follow me, follow, follow me,  
Follow me, follow, follow me.

[Pause, quasi recitative]  
What is the matter, Toby?  
What is it you want to tell me?  
Kneel down before me,  
And now tell me.

[ Toby kneeling before her as though he were speaking ]
Monica, Monica can’t you see
That my heart is bleeding, bleeding for you?
I loved you, Monica, all my life,
With all my breath, with all my blood.
You haunt the mirror of my sleep,
You are my night. You are my light
And the jailer of my day.

[Monica stands before Toby again, playing]
How dare you scoundrel talk to me like that!
Don’t you know who I am?
I’m the Queen of Aroundel!
I shall have you put in chains!

[Toby kneeling again before her]
You are my princess, you are my queen,
And I’m only Toby, one of your slaves,
And still I love you and always loved you
With all my breath, with all my blood.
I love your laughter,
I love your hair,
I love your deep and nocturnal eyes,
I love your soft hands,
So white and winged,
I love the slender branch of your throat.

[Monica turns]
Toby, don’t speak to me like that!
You make my head swim.

[Toby kneels]
Monica, Monica, fold me in your satin gown.
Margaret McCurry

Monica, Monica, give me your mouth.
Monica, Monica, fall in my arms!

[Quasi-recitative: Toby hides his face, Monica notices]
Why, Toby! You’re not crying are you?
Toby, I want you to know that you have
The most beautiful voice in the world.
Figure 1: Gian Carlo Menotti, The Medium, page 65, measure 27

(Toby seizes Monica abruptly by the arm. She turns and looks at him in complete astonishment.)

What is the matter, To-by? What is it you want to tell me?

Qu'est-ce qui te prend, To-by? Qu'est-ce que tu veux me dire?
Figure 2: Gian Carlo Menotti, *The Medium*, page 66, measure 28. Notice the sustained rests in the vocal line.
(Toby suddenly hides his face in his arms.) (Monica stares at him, completely bewildered.)

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Why, Toby! You're not crying, are you?

Mais, Toby! Mais ne pleure donc pas?

Figure 3: Gian Carlo Menotti, *The Medium*, page 69, measure 60
Margaret McCurry

Works Cited


Jensen-Moulton, Stephanie. “‘What is it you want to tell me?’: Muteness and Masculinity in Menotti’s *The Medium*.” N. d.


