Defining Strength: The Key to Personal Happiness

“Choose silence of all virtues, for by it you hear other men's imperfections, and conceal your own” (Blacketor 353). One of man’s most effective weapons lies within his own self…his words. Humans too often take for granted the power of words. Many times, individuals do not think before they speak; yet much can hide beneath the surface of simplest statements. Words are powerful. Words are complex. Words often harbor deep meaning and give a glimpse inside inner-most thoughts and emotions. This is why individuals must choose words carefully. In light of their importance, what does a lack of words or silence suggest? Can silence hold deep meaning as well? August Strindberg causes readers to ponder these questions in his play, “The Stronger.” Strindberg’s choice of style, use of communication and character development all cause the reader to question happiness, love, and the meaning of true strength.

Strindberg’s writing style sets the framework for the whole play. This begins with his choice to portray the story of Madame X and Mademoiselle Y within a one-act play. “Because of the restriction of… dramatic techniques, the language of the one-act play becomes highly suggestive. There is no room for any irrelevant statement” (Aziz 23). Since the extent of the reader’s knowledge of the characters is minimal, readers are forced to judge both characters based on the one scene where the two women interact. As Aziz mentions, the meanings of the words are more significant in this play because they are fewer. Strindberg strategically chose to feed the readers opinion by allowing them only a glimpse into the lives of the two women. While
there may be brief insights inside the thoughts of Madame X, there are many questions that Strindberg chooses to leave unanswered. This ambiguity is not only fueled by the silence of Mademoiselle Y, but also by various brief statements made by MME X. “But there was always discord when you came to our house, because I saw that my husband couldn't endure you…” (Strindberg 48). While Madam X divulges that MLLE Y caused problems within her household, she never discloses why. Perhaps, she herself didn’t know, or maybe this is Strindberg’s way of leaving some elements to the imagination of the reader. Either way, Strindberg’s writing style leaves the reader with questions that can only be answered within the imagination.

The most prominent element within this play is the use of communication between the two characters. While she might not have spoken any words, MLLE Y communicated throughout the play nonverbally. “Such messages can be communicated through gesture, body language or posture, facial expression and eye contact, object communication such as clothing, hairstyles or even architecture, symbols and infographics” (Jasim 302). The reader sees examples of several of these elements throughout the play, both from Madame X and Mademoiselle Y. MLLE Y is shown “Look[ing] up ironically and curiously” (Strindberg 48) and “Shriek[ing] with laughter” (48). Even though she chooses not to use words, Mademoiselle Y still manages to portray emotion using her face and other gestures. The true question here lies within the choice to stay silent. Is Mademoiselle Y’s silence a sign of strength or weakness? Communication is a staple in human life and relationships. What is not so clearly understood is the significance of silence. The power of silence is only as effective as the meaning supporting it.

Lastly, Strindberg’s depth of characters plays a significant role in the meaning of the play. While readers may not have gotten much time to get to know MME X and MLLE Y’s true motives, the dialogue – or lack thereof – hinted at deeper issues within each of these women’s
lives. While she did not actually speak, Mademoiselle Y is possibly the most complex character between the two women. “Is she silent because Mrs X…does not give her much chance to say anything? … because she wants to keep her relationship to Bob secret…? Does her silence express a hostile attitude to Mrs X? … Why should I pretend that we are friends, when I know we are not? Or even … a wish to spare her… Or is it a way of making Mrs X insecure” (Törnqvist 2)? These questions plague readers as they continually listen to MME X harp about MLLE Y. One would assume that it is a part of human nature to defend ones’ self when being verbally attacked, yet why does Mademoiselle Y simply sit on the sidelines? This leads readers to conclude that perhaps she knows that what Madame X is speaking is truth. On the other hand, however, it is possible that MLLE Y just thinks that MME X is crazy. After all, Madame X is droning on, minute by minute, about a suspicion for which she has no concrete evidence. In that case, Mademoiselle Y’s silence is to prove that she is wiser and far beyond Madame X’s petty drama. The beauty of this play, though, is that readers will never know the hearts of the characters for themselves. While Strindberg lays an excellent foundation for the two characters, it is left to the reader to determine the rest of the story.

The unanswered questions that stem from this one-act play are staggering. It seems nearly impossible for the imagination to wander far beyond one simple scene with two characters, yet Strindberg manages to create a situation that causes readers to look outside of the current setting presented to them. His writing style, use of communication and character development all contribute to the complexity of “The Stronger.” The ultimate question that stems is, “Who is stronger?” Can silence be an indicator of strength? How do love and happiness relate to one’s personal strength? While Strindberg brings these questions to light, the answers lie within one’s own heart. While silence can be an effective tool, it doesn’t necessarily make a person stronger.
Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines strength as: “The power of resisting attack.” By this definition, either woman could be seen as strong. Overall, Mademoiselle Y and Madame X were both strong in their own right. Perhaps neither one was “The Stronger” of the two. At the end of the day, it is not wise to spend time comparing lives since each situation is different and makes each individual stronger.
Works Cited


