

Le silence de la mer analysis



**ASSIGN
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Analyse the depiction of Franco-German collaboration in the short story 'Le Silence de la mer'. How effective is it in contesting the imagery and ideals of collaboration?

The imagery and ideals (and indeed questions on their authenticity) regarding Franco-German collaboration are perceived and presented through means of a German soldier's transition from ignorance to knowledge. At the beginning of the story Werner von Ebrennac is idealistic, almost delusional, in his perspective on the German occupation. Towards the final 'episodes' of the story, however, an austere sense of darkness and truth pervades as he undergoes a transformation in his outlook which directly results from the revelations he faces in Paris. Vercors is highly effective in illustrating the fundamental flaws in idealising such a notion because by presenting the reader with an optimistic character – and one whose naivety is flagrantly exaggerated to the point of being implausible – he succeeds in juxtaposing the ideal and the actuality of Franco-German collaboration, thus inviting readers to witness their stark contrast.

This question cannot be answered without incorporating an analysis of one of the short story's most significant images. Ubiquitous within it is the concept of a 'marriage' between France and Germany. As von Ebrennac himself says of Briand, "Il va nous unir, comme mari et femme". France, as is usual in her traditional guise of 'Marianne', is the feminised party; the 'femme' of the metaphor, whilst Germany is portrayed as the husband; the 'mari'. Written at a time when women could not, particularly in the context of Nazi and Vichy ideals, expect the same rights as their husband, this pervasive symbol can be interpreted as one which casts France in a role of subjugated

female to Germany's dominant male rather than a collaborator on an equal footing with her invader. This device is deployed in more detail on pages 29 and 30, when von Ebrennac tacitly compares France and Germany's relationship – and on a lesser scale the unfeasible liaison between himself and the narrator's niece – to the fairytale 'The Beauty and the Beast'.

On a superficial level Vercors is suggesting that the so-called 'collaboration' between the two countries exists solely in the realm of myth and legend; that the 'polite invasion' of the early years of German occupation was a fantastic smokescreen designed to disguise its true tyrannical nature. On a deeper level it becomes clear that von Ebrennac's idealisations conceal an underlying recognition of Nazi values in spite of his seemingly personable demeanour. With the fairytale's protagonists evidently serving as symbols of the two countries, the soldier inverts the emotional dynamics of the story by focusing on the torment of the Beast (Germany) rather than the capture of Beauty (France), creating an unusually positive portrayal of the former. Much like Nazi propaganda, the true train of events is glossed over and undermined. Furthermore, there lies a sinister undercurrent beneath the 'bonheur sublime' that this union is supposed to give rise to, namely "leurs enfants, qui additionnent et mêlent les dons de leurs parents, sont les plus beaux que la terre ait portés." In this sentence von Ebrennac, whether he realises it or not, is indirectly referring to the Nazi aspiration to create a 'Herrenvolk', or 'master race', of Aryan people to improve their breeding stock. Finally, the very act of translating a traditional French story into German (La Belle et la bête becomes Das Tier und die Schöne) represents far more than a linguistic practicality; it is symbolic of translating French culture,

society and politics into German as well. From this we can glean that Franco-German ‘collaboration’ isn’t the ideal which the Nazi propaganda machine, and of course the German soldier in this story, would have us believe. It is by no means a symbiotic relationship, but an invasion in which only one country will prevail; that of the invader.

Although the complicity of France in advocating Nazi ideology during the war years has been brought into question in decades since, Vercors’ French characters are unquestionably resisters. ‘Le Silence de la mer’ is most easily interpreted as an allegory of passive resistance; the narrator and his niece’s refusal to speak to the soldier who lives in their home uninvited is an act of great self-sacrifice and patriotism; an imprisonment of the mind which serves to protect the values of the culture and country they hold so dearly. In the niece’s case, her silence and failure to make eye-contact with von Ebrennac is also a complex denial of her blossoming feelings for him. She forfeits what might, in other historic circumstances, have been a happy and suitable union in order to serve the best interests of her country.

An analysis of the narrator’s library reveals how incompatible a ‘marriage’ France and Nazi Germany would be. For gracing its shelves (as observed on page 28) is a long list of classic authors, mainly French, with two things in common: they all uphold the Republican emphasis on intellectualism and individualism, and most would have been banned under the occupation. Although the two characters never verbalise their beliefs, the titles contained in this library are the literary manifestation of their convictions; the value they place on civil liberties and democracy. The inclusion of great writers of other nationalities, for example Shakespeare, is no doubt intended to

symbolise resistance on a wider, European level. In short, the protagonists' interests lie in resistance, not collaboration.

The closing line of 'Le Silence de la mer' – 'Dehors luisait au travers de la brume un pâle soleil. Il me sembla qu'il faisait très froid' – epitomises, through means of pathetic fallacy, the deception of the early years of the German occupation. The relationship between France and Germany is not 'un amour partagé', but, as the references to Shakespearean plays Macbeth and Othello imply, a tragedy, as one seeks to erase the spirit of the other. Von Ebrennac's compatriot's words expose the true nature of Franco-German collaboration: "' Nous ne sommes pas des fous ni des niais: nous avons l'occasion de détruire la France, elle le sera. Pas seulement sa puissance: son âme aussi. Son âme surtout. Son âme est le plus grand danger.'" Not a collaboration at all, but a conquest.