

Quiet torrential sound literature review example

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In Joan Ackermann's short play " Quiet Torrential Sound," two sisters, Claire and Monica, sit down for a lunch while on vacation, after having seen an outdoor performance of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. Monica talks her sister's ear off while criticizing her, while Claire finally opens up about a sex workshop she took some time ago, in which she began to experience the thrill of orgasm. Throughout the scene, the power relationship between the two sisters changes and shifts, all the while tackling issues of sibling rivalry and sexual liberation.

In the opening conversation, Monica clearly dominates the scene - Claire merely responds with " mm" s and small, one-word responses while Monica drones on, passive-aggressively criticizing Claire about her appearance, her taste and her behavior. She proves herself to be the dominant force in the relationship, as Claire merely wishes to go about her business, while Monica feels the need to prove her superiority to others. Seeing the classical concert affirms her perceived good taste. In the beginning of the scene, Monica cattily derides the restaurant, through the flowers and vase, and sarcastically calling the place " charming." She then proceeds to deride Claire's assumed lack of vocabulary and her plain features, all under the guise of helping her.

The food that each of the characters orders is indicative of their characters and their outlooks. Monica orders decaffeinated coffee, with Sweet & Low; she makes a tremendous point to Nathan, the waiter, that she will be upset if he gives her caffeinated coffee. Throughout the scene, she continues to reference light, fat-free foods, like frozen light yogurt, indicating an ardent, obsessive desire to not get fat. Claire, on the other hand, orders a Coke and

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a hot fudge sundae, but changes her order to Diet Coke after a remark from Monica. Given her choice of beverage and the attitude with which she greets Claire's choice, Monica is overly neurotically concerned about her figure and appearance, choosing to stress herself out by refusing to eat things that are caloric. Claire, on the other hand, simply wishes to get something that she will enjoy, regardless of whether or not it is fattening.

Monica, as a character, is a deeply abrasive yet conflicted woman who masks her insecurities through a thick veneer of snootiness and arrogance. In her constant criticism of Claire, she wishes to prove herself to be better-looking, more fashionable, and more tasteful than her sister. She misses no opportunity to mention the brand of bug repellent she uses, as well as the fact that they just went to a classical concert. Monica, in her dialogue, reveals a desperation to be a cultured woman; one can infer that she does not actually enjoy classical music as much as she claims, but goes to it in order to feel as though she is a cultured, sophisticated woman. Monica's perspective is that excellence comes with perfection; she expresses her utter confusion at the fact that Beethoven went deaf, even though he was a genius.

Claire, on the other hand, is a much more confident, self-possessed person, though seemingly submissive on the outside. Claire, instead of actually feeling bad about herself, or buying Monica's press, simply knows how to handle Monica; she lets Monica go on and on, and talk about herself. However, when the moment comes, Claire decides to mention the sex workshop that Monica had pointed her to (likely in another passive-

aggressive putdown). Claire goes on to describe the positive turn her life has taken now that she has figured out how to orgasm.

The subject of the orgasm and the Beethoven concert are two parallel subjects within the play; these are two topics that Claire and Monica, respectively, latch onto as their means of power over the other. Monica is completely convinced that she is validated as a sophisticated, cultured person who can feel better about herself by listening to a classical music concert. Meanwhile, Claire is experiencing an honest, freeing experience through her sexual awakening. At the same time, both of these characters use their topics as weapons against the other. Claire is uncomfortable (or at least soft-spoken) when Monica insists on discussing the concert. Monica then attempts to distract herself with reading the brochure while Claire goes on about her new sex life and her incredible happiness. Claire goes on to compare an orgasm with Beethoven; she says that having an orgasm, and sharing that feeling with someone else, is better than "distant rolling hills," or "Beethoven's Seventh Symphony" (p. 1094).

Monica, despite her arrogant veneer, is jealous of Claire's sexual accomplishments, and the fact that her orgasms are better than anything she aspires to experience. She then takes it out on Nathan, who has purposefully given her caffeinated coffee (likely due to her poor attitude). This is her attempt to gain power back in the relationship, as she tries to strong-arm her way into dominance. However, once that episode ends, Monica starts to calm down, especially as Claire gets up to leave. It is not until Claire reiterates the fact that Monica is her "only living sister" that

Monica wakes up and realizes how she has been treating her own family. At that point, Monica apologizes (what is likely a challenging feat for her), finally using the same kind of short language that Claire used in the beginning. It is at this point that the power in the relationship has fully transferred to Claire.

In the end of the play, it is clear that there is a somewhat better understanding between the two, and the power gets equalized, more or less. Monica opens up and requests that Claire forward her any pertinent literature for the workshop, indicating a willingness to learn. At the same time, she still manages a small comment when she derides Claire for using "geeze Louise"; however, the tone is different, as it comes from a more positive, teasing place instead of true criticism. Monica has accepted Claire as an equal in this moment - something Claire knew all along - and they begin a more equitable, amicable relationship.

In conclusion, "Quiet Torrential Sound" is about two sisters finding equity in their relationship through different means. All throughout their life, Monica has seemingly held the power in the relationship, as Claire unassumingly goes about her life, secure in herself. However, when she finally experiences her first orgasm, the start of a new sexual life that Monica has lacked, she feels the need to express that to her jealous sister, in order to demonstrate that she is her equal. At the end of the play, Monica realizes that she should tone down her attitude somewhat and humble herself, for once, to the possibility that her sister may have something to teach her.

References

Ackermann, J. (2010). Quiet Torrential Sound. Literature to Go, ed. Meyer.

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