

Silence

Author: Shusaku Endo (1923-1996)

Type of work: Novel

Type of plot: Historical realism

Time of plot: 1632-1644

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Overview: In Shusaku Endo's haunting look at the introduction of Christianity to Japan, the island nation itself is a central character. As the seventeenth century Portuguese missionaries seek to bring their god to Japan, they encounter what one eventually calls, "this swamp of Japan," where Christianity will never take root. Joan Frawley Desmond notes, "the austere terrain of *Silence* is like a Japanese Golgotha, stubborn and brutal, yet empty and soundless, producing not even an echo of Christian love or hope to break the desolation."

The Coastal Villages in Kyushu

Kyushu is the southernmost island of the Japanese chain. The missionaries land, therefore, at the foot of the nation, an interesting geographic resonance with the importance of feet and faces to this text. The coastal villages are the place of faith, but this is not a faith that many European Christians would recognize. Endo himself notes:

I'm not sure if their faith could be called Christian in the strict sense of the word. Anyway, they held on the faith that had been passed down from their ancestors. But they had to lead a double life. On the one hand, they pretended to be Buddhists; and when they were summoned at the end of each year, they would step on

a picture of the Virgin Mary (or *fumie*) to prove themselves non-Christians. On the other hand, on returning home, they would repent with tears for their unfaithful behavior.

Only such an isolated area could support this life. Far away from the seat of governmental and religious power, these peasants, who ironically would have trouble being recognized as Christians, could use their landscape to hide their religious activities.

This faith is simple yet complex. This mixture of folk beliefs and western Christianity is nevertheless the cause of death (and eternal life?) for many of the villagers and their missionaries. This relationship is also manifested in the landscape, as the bounty of the seacoast itself becomes the setting for their hand-to-mouth existence, and the presence of such an immensity of water gives way to many instances of dire thirst throughout the text.

Finally, these villages are the place of trust and betrayal. While the missionaries trust the peasants and are trusted by them, one of peasants closest to the missionaries (Kichijiro) eventually betrays them. As he is held close, he distances himself. As the lone surviving missionary is led to Nagasaki, Kichijiro remains with him (Rodrigues) for the length of his captivity, attempting to explain and justify his actions as he begs for forgiveness. Again, the isolation of the villages allows Kichijiro his life: news does not travel fast, so he can remain, in effect, a double agent, professing his Christianity while subverting its spread in his nation.

Nagasaki

Nagasaki is still on the island of Kyushu, but it is in the northern half of the island. Therefore, after landing at the foot of the island, the missionaries must travel up the body, to the head of the island, to Nagasaki. When Japan was a closed country, Nagasaki was the only city

open to foreigners. So Rodrigues seeks his teacher Ferreira there, where both are gaijin, in the city of the gaijin.

Nagasaki is the place of civic and religious power. The formerly great missionary Ferreira has been sucked into the Japanese bureaucracy. He's turned his back on his faith, but still can make himself useful as a translator for the government. Western religious power has met the East, and has lost. Nagasaki represents not the triumph of Buddhism or Shinto, but the ultimate failure of Christianity. In this urban environment the crypto-Christians of the villages are spared by the apostasy of their missionaries. Endo suggests that the relative isolation of the rural villages may make it easier to persevere in one's faith. When one's faith must rub shoulders with those who do not believe, or indeed those who are actively against it, as in Nagasaki, the faith may quaver. Of course, in his usual way, he is also suggesting that faith reaches its full fruition in the polis, as it is given the opportunity to be used for the sake of another.

In the midst of so many people, Rodrigues finds utter desolation. He has been betrayed and tortured. His former teacher and hero has apostasized. He eventually apostasizes. And as the novel closes, we are left with the image of a minor civic functionary, who lives out the rest of his life as his teacher did, attempting to be useful, to simultaneously remember, forget, celebrate, and atone for the defining act of his life.