Speaking Silence:
Forms and Functions of Absence in Literature

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To my parents, Peter and Maria,
without whose love and support
this thesis would not have been possible.
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1) Introduction

It is common practice in literary studies to evaluate literature for both its meaning and its structural composition. The emphasis in this quest of appropriately interpreting and analysing literature has always been on what is visible, tangible, and present on the page. Literature, however, is a complex and highly meaningful signifying system. Meaning in literature is therefore not only created by a simple, informative combination of semiotic signs, but also by a number of poetic (or aesthetic) principles designed to enhance meaning. These means of foregrounding meaning in literature are, of course, most obviously means visible on the page and range from the employment of metaphor and rhetorical devices to the choice of particular and recurrent imagery. Literature, however, is not limited to the use of these commonly known and well-discussed means of creating meaning. Often overlooked, but nonetheless potentially highly signifying, are volitional, non-arbitrary instances of absence in literature.

Although at first it might strike one as unusual to investigate the parts of a text that are ‘absent’, not visibly there on the page or in the performance, these signifying absences nonetheless deserve a closer inspection and more attention in the corpus of literary studies.

Firstly, human beings have a tendency to make sense of the world by the use of binary oppositions. Thus, we distinguish easily between life and death, nature and culture, young and old, pretty and ugly – the list can be continued ad infinitum – and nobody would ever question that where there is one part of the pair, there must be the other in easy, semantic reach. Not only are our lives pervaded by binary oppositions, however, it is also to a great extent defined by the same: without contrast we are incapable of creating meaning. Death is the absence of life, nature the absence of culture and so. While this ultimately leads to the post-structural problem of Derrida’s endless deferral of meaning, the omnipresence of binary oppositions in our everyday thoughts and language nonetheless strongly emphasises the importance of contrast and opposition for our sense-making. If binary oppositions are so important, however, why would we wish to ignore the very basic opposition of absence and presence? Clearly one cannot exist without the other, which already appears to be justification enough to dedicate a thesis to the exploration of the less usual side of the literary coin, namely absences.
Secondly, it cannot be stressed enough that literature deviates greatly from everyday language, both in its style and purpose. Where everyday language usually has predominantly informative functions, literary language also has an aesthetic one. Moreover, meaning tends to be far more compact and contracted (albeit not necessarily more visible and easily accessible) in literature than in everyday language use. Thus, the thought that literature might utilise empty space, blanks and absences in order to create meaning appears not only as a logical consequence, but also as something which has hitherto been a great oversight in the exploration of available literary means.

Although not every absence in either everyday language or literature is meaningful – a speaker running out of breath and pausing as a consequence, or a blank, arbitrary space in a literary manuscript, for instance, cannot be read as signifying – there are nonetheless possibilities of exploiting absences in literature in a meaningful way. Absences can – and do – enhance the reader’s imagination by forcing him to fill in the gaps. Absences can also be metaphorical devices of rendering ‘speechlessness’ more visible and, in consequence, more tangible in a text. As one might have experienced in a horror-movie, sometimes the absence of something, the not-knowing what is going on behind the next (literary) corner can greatly enhance the suspense of a movie or book. Whereas all these are important functions of absences in literature, literary absences can also iconically mirror meaning: This ‘iconicity of absence’ (cf. Wing 1993: 303ff.) is surprisingly frequent in literature of all genres throughout the course of literary history. Even though this ‘iconicity of absence’ is a highly interesting topic and shall be pointed out if it occurs in the analyses, it is important to note that not iconic absences, but rather generally meaningful absences in literature, are the central subject of this paper.

It has thus become evident that, indeed, the various forms and functions of absence in literature deserve a closer examination. In the following, I will strive to add to the small but enlightening corpus of critical texts available on the subject of literary absences. For this purpose I will at first provide a systematic overview over the main forms and possibilities of literary absences. Using these main forms – semantic, visual and aural blanks or absences – as a structuring principle, the theoretical framework will then be applied to examples taken from prose, drama and poetry of various epochs and be analysed for their signifying value as well as their structural form and function. This paper does not aim to provide a conclusive historical or genre specific overview with regards to literary absences. Instead, this thesis strives to provide a systematic overview over the various forms and functions of the
phenomenon of literary absences. It would be interesting, in a next step, to investigate literary absences in a certain cultural epoch or a specific genre. This thesis, however, contents itself with outlining the phenomenon and supporting the presence of meaningful literary absences with examples. For each form of literary blank – visual, aural or semantic – an example from each of the main genres of literature, poetry, drama and prose, is described. The sequence of examples is, therefore, not a historical one but rather defined by the structural form of the absence itself.

It can thus indeed be said, that the examination of absences in literature is an extremely interesting and fruitful endeavour. The overwhelming presence of absences in literature alone already suggests that sensitivity and awareness towards what is not present on the page should be raised, and that the signifying blanks should not be ignored in the overall interpretation of a text. With this paper I hope to contribute to exactly that awareness by pointing out that, clearly, absence in literature is a noteworthy phenomenon that can be both highly meaningful and a great contribution to the entirety of a text. So now, without further ado, let us focus on the theoretical aspects of formally investigating forms and functions of absence in literature.

2) Theoretical Framework

As has already been cursorily mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, one central aspect of signifying absences in literature is what has been coined the ‘iconicity of absence’ (cf. Wing 1993: 303ff.). The term already suggests that absences in literature can be (and effectively are) iconic on multiple occasions. In order to clearly define what we will treat as iconic absences, it is at first necessary to refresh our memories on the triadic semiotic model introduced by Charles Sanders Peirce.

Peirce (1905/1990: particularly pp. 278ff) divides the entirety of signs into three different types using the relationship between signifier and signified as a dividing principle. The great number of signs is what Peirce calls symbolic signs. Symbolic signs merely have an arbitrary connection; the sign can only be decoded because the meaning of the sign has been conventionalised in discourse. Letters, for instance, have no direct connection to what they mean: the letter A means a simply because at some point in our development we learned that the letter represents the corresponding sound. The second class of signs according to Peirce
are **indexical signs**. Indexical signs feature a causal relationship between signifier and signified, for instance we know that when there is smoke there must also be fire. Lastly, and for our purposes most importantly, Peirce describes **iconic signs**. In the case of iconic signs, the signifier and signified of the sign are related by similarity. This similarity can either be a direct sense-sense relationship, for instance in onomatopoeia where the relationship of similarity between signifier and signified is concrete (the word mimes the sound), or more complex and figurative. The first type is called ‘imagic iconicity’, or in the case of onomatopoeia perhaps more fittingly ‘perceptual iconicity’ as the senses are concerned, whereas the second, less obvious type is named ‘diagrammatic iconicity’. Lastly, ‘metaphorical iconicity’ is described (cf. Nänny and Fischer 1999: xxi ff.). As it is not the aim of this thesis to investigate the various forms of iconicity, it is for my purpose sufficient to say that iconicity has a clear relationship of similarity between signifier and signified. The catch-phrase ‘form mimes meaning’ has been established and become so common that even one of Nänny and Fischer’s books on iconicity is entitled *Form Miming Meaning*. This catchphrase perhaps best describes what I will treat as iconicity (or more particularly, as iconicity of absence) in the following. Whenever iconicity occurs in literature, the form of the text either directly or less concretely mimes the semantics of the text at hand. What is true for present, visible iconicity is also true for the iconicity of absence: blanks in a text can mime absences in the semantics of a story, play or poem. They can signify poverty and loss, they can be placeholders for silences, or reflect speechlessness on the level of discourse. In short: iconic absences are present and functional in the same way as ‘iconic presences’ are, as will be seen on multiple occasions in the various analyses.

It is also furthermore important to remark that although everyday language consists mostly of symbolic signs, the iconic potential of language “assumes in literature an importance far beyond that which it has in everyday language.” (Leech 1987, as quoted in Nänny and Fischer 1999: xxvi). This already hints towards the fact that literature deviates from everyday language in that it explores Peirce’s triadic model more extensively. The same observation is made by Roman Jakobson in his description of the various functions of language. His **poetic function**, a language function not exclusively found in poetics but aesthetic, literary texts at whole, describes the “set (*Einstellung*) toward the MESSAGE as such”, the “focus on the message for its own sake.” (Jakobson 1960: 356). Jakobson further argues that the poetic function “projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.” (Jakobson 1960: 358). Semantic recurrences in
literature are, therefore, not arbitrary but meaningful and enhancing the richness of meaning in a given text. Whereas Jakobson refers to recurrent ‘presences’, however, an (over-)abundance of literary absences can be equally as signifying and contribute to the density of meaning within a given text. Once it can be accepted that literature is a signifying system that propagates meaning on levels other than mere informative ones, it might become clearer as to why absences in literature do deserve attention as signifying units in a given text.

It has been thus established that literary absences, perhaps most strongly if the blanks are also iconic, can be signifying and therefore contributing to the meaning of a text as a whole. The signifying qualities of absences or blanks were also enlighteningly explored by Werner Wolf. Wolf (2005: 114ff.) proposes a typology differentiating the various forms of absences. According to Wolf, there are seven criteria which can be used to distinguish between the subtypes of absences. Firstly, there is a basic functional criterion distinguishing between non-signifying blanks and signifying blanks, whereas the first are of course of no great interest to research. Secondly, blanks can be structured according to their semiotic class, i.e. they can be symbolic, indexical, or perhaps most interestingly iconic. Thirdly, blanks can be supplemented (e.g. “asterisks, dashes or gestures”, Wolf 2005: 115) or not. Fourthly, there are further semiotic criteria, which means that “blanks can occur in chains or patterns of signifiers (as aural or visual absences), or – in combination with this form – in chains or patterns of signifieds (and consequently as ‘semantic’ gaps);” (Wolf 2005: 115). Fifth, the position of the blank can be used as distinguishing criterion, i.e. the blanks can occur as “inside signifying systems [...] or outside as framing blanks.” (Wolf 2005: 115). Sixth, the kind of the signifying system in which the blanks appear can be a criterion; it therefore matters what medium or genre is used, which means (as this paper will only examine examples from literature) that blanks can appear in all of the main forms of literature – prose, drama and lyric poetry – and that some forms lend themselves more willingly to certain forms of absences than others. The last criterion is the function of the blank, which is of course an important question to ask in every analysis.

Thus, Wolf has provided a useful framework for the differentiation as well as description of forms and functions of absences. As can easily be seen in the following, I have adopted Wolf’s framework as a structuring principle for the discussion of forms and functions of absences in my thesis. As we will see, examples for every criterion from every literary genre can be found, which once more emphasises the fact that absences in literature are clearly not to be overlooked in an in-depth analysis of any given text.
Before my discussion can move on to more practical applications of forms and functions of absences in literature, one more long-established form of absence must be mentioned and outlined: the semantic Leerstellen. ‘Leerstelle’ is a term coined by Wolfgang Iser and develops the concept of Ingarden’s Unbestimmtheitsstellen (uncertainties) further. Basically, Ingarden established that in a given text, the described object is not a ‘real’ object, but merely a ‘schematic construct’ including various Unbestimmtheitsstellen. These Unbestimmtheitsstellen are unavoidable effects of the chosen medium. For instance, in literature it is impossible to narrate every miniscule detail, nothing can be described with attention to every possibility, some things, for the purpose of not resulting in an endless digression, the text has to leave out some details. These Unbestimmtheitsstellen are, however, usually not noted by the reader as they are promptly and aptly filled in. Whereas Unbestimmtheitsstellen are necessary but not deliberate, a Leerstelle is a space of semantic absence. (cf. Iser 1984: 267-68). A Leerstelle can occur, as Iser argues, when Ingarden’s ‘schematic constructs’ follow each other in a direct sequence – which is something that on occasion will inevitably happen -- most commonly wherever there is more than one plotline happening simultaneously which, of course, have to be narrated sequentially. (cf. Iser 1970: 15). Leerstellen are thus uncertainties in a text, gaps which are void of any specific information given by either the narration itself or the narrator. These absences, however, are not at all detrimental to the enjoyment of the text, but rather serve an important purpose. Confronted with uncertainties and endowed with the innate human desire to make sense of the world, the reader is activated and invited to co-produce the text. The greater the uncertainty of a text, the stronger the reader is challenged to descry the meaning and possible function of the text (cf. Iser 1970: 8). This, to a certain point, can contribute greatly to the suspense and enjoyment of a text. Iser (1970: 16) even goes as far as to state that a text filled densely with certainties is at danger of boring the reader because he is no longer invited to the co-construction of the text. It is thus evident, that Leerstellen, a form of semantic absences in literature, clearly contribute to the overall aesthetics of a text in that they, amongst other possible functions, enhance suspense by incorporating the reader as a co-author of the text. The uncertainties created by Leerstellen are, however, never arbitrary: there is only a limited number of possible interpretations and the reader can be directed towards a meaningful decoding of the text, for example by the use of narratorial commentary and evaluation (cf. Iser 1970: 19ff.). Leerstellen are thus not arbitrary if necessary blanks in a text, but clearly meaningful participants thereof.
It is furthermore important to emphasise that although *Leerstellen* are not usually iconic devices, they can, nonetheless gain a certain iconic quality. This would be, for instance, the case if *Leerstellen*, semantic absences, frequently co-occurred with a central, thematic meaninglessness. The Leerstellen in this case would become a discursive device iconically rendering the thematic absence on the level of story by a more literal, copious application of semantic blanks to the text. Additionally, *Leerstellen* can – and as will be seen shortly do – co-occur with other blanks, preferably visual blanks. Thus, a *Leerstelle*, a semantic absence, can be iconically mirrored by a visual absence, for example the empty page between chapters.

Thus, the various signifying forms of absences in literature have been outlined, which provides us with the theoretical framework needed for the closer analyses of absences in literature. I will do so by at first detailing various examples of non-supplemented semantic blanks, namely *Leerstellen*, followed by an analysis of both aural and visual blanks in prose, drama and poetry. The examples chosen are by no means isolated instances and cover a great variety not only of genre but also of literary epoch. Signifying absences, once one is attuned to their presence as well as their importance, pervade the corpus of English literature. Yet now, without further ado, let us focus on the first example of a deceptively classical *Leerstelle*, the Leerstelle between book I and II in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*.

3) Non-supplemented Semantic Blanks: *Leerstellen*

3.1. Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*: a Classical Leerstelle Gone Iconic

Thomas Hardy’s novel *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, subtitled “A Pure Woman”, follows the trials of the eponymous heroine Tess. Tess is born into a poor labouring family, but as it soon turns out the family has ties to the noble d’Urberville family. Tess is sent to Tantridge, the seat of the d’Urberville family, where she encounters Alec d’Urberville who becomes instantly infatuated with her and consequently begins to pursue young and inexperienced Tess relentlessly. Tess finds herself unequipped to reject Alec’s advances effectively, and appears to be torn between feeling slightly flattered and unsettled by the sexual innuendo. Eventually, it comes to pass that Tess alongside some friends goes to a dancing party and loses track of time, and later, unfortunately, also of her companions. Thus vulnerable, she encounters Alec, who offers to ride her back to Tantridge, to which Tess reluctantly agrees. Due to her weariness she does at first not realise that Alec deliberately misses the turn to
Tantridge, and so the two of them end up in an ancient forest named The Chase. Alec informs Tess that they have lost their way and invites Tess to rest on a bed of leaves while he looks for directions. When Alec returns, what is often wrongly termed the ‘rape scene’ ensues, the events of which will determine the further course of the novel and Tess’ fate in the most disastrous ways. Although the novel is dense both in action as well as artful depiction of the events, it suffices for our purposes to know that by the end of the first book, titled “The Maiden”, Tess loses her virginity and enters the second book as “Maiden No More”.

What is remarkable about this passage is that the events taking place in the last chapter of book I are left almost entirely to the reader’s imagination. The result is an uncertainty that will pervade the rest of the novel: it is, indeed, impossible to tell whether Tess is raped by Alec, or, in a weak moment, succumbs to his advances thus furthering her own fall. This uncertainty, however, is of course not arbitrary. Rather, it supports the difficulty of one of the novel’s central questions, namely ‘What is purity? What is morally good, what is evil?’ To state a clear cut opposition between purity and impurity is, of course, a problematic undertaking per se, and although indicators for the one or other view of Tess as well as the existing norms of the time can be found in the course of the novel, the central ambivalence nonetheless remains.

It is, however, not the purpose of this paper to digress too far into the themes and topics this particular. Rather, let us return to the fact that the last pages of the first book effectively shut out the reader from the events taking place. Firstly, as has been already mentioned above, what happens between Alec and Tess is only tentatively described. It is only the general circumstances of the encounter (Alec’s relentless sexual advances, as well as the isolated forest setting) that provide the reader with a framework for the “coarse pattern” that should be “traced” upon Tess’ “beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically as blank as snow.” (Tess: 65). This vagueness is perpetuated until the abrupt ending of the book. Book II, then, begins with Tess back in the valley of her childhood. It is “late October” and “some few weeks subsequent to the night ride in The Chase” (Tess: 66) have passed. Thus it is not only unclear what exactly happened in the forest, but also what happened in between the encounter between Alec and Tess and Tess’ sudden return home. This, of course, leaves us with a classical Leerstelle. The Leerstelle between book I and II of Tess of the d’Urbervilles here clearly serves two purposes. Firstly, as Iser suggested in his discussion of the Leerstelle, the blank within the discourse certainly challenges the reader to fill in the gaps. Thus, the reader’s imagination is activated, if guided into a certain direction:
we know that Tess, now “Maiden No More”, must have lost her virginity either by force or seduction, and can perhaps safely assume that the events taking place in the forest have prompted her to flee Tantridge and Alec for a few possible reasons; Tess might, understandably, be afraid that Alec might violate her again if she stayed at Tantridge; she might, also, find it necessary to protect what is left of her purity; as the reader will learn later, the sexual encounter is also not without consequences: Tess is pregnant and might want to conceal this fact from the world, finding it easier to do so in her familiar surroundings; lastly, Tess might also want to be back in the arms of her (problematic) family again, might hope that she might receive support from her relatives. Whatever Tess’ reasons and motivations are, it is the Leerstelle that engages the reader in the way as I have attempted to emphasise by following several different possibilities of filling in the blank between the two books. This engagement, in turn, has the function to, on the one hand, empathise with Tess by attempting to trace her thoughts and actions, and on the other to immerse the reader more fully in the fictional world, thus effectively enhancing the aesthetic illusion. Asides these important functions, the Leerstelle secondly also contributes to the ambivalence of the novel, the uncertainty of what has happened to Tess, which as has already been mentioned greatly aids the problematic question of purity vs. impurity.

Thus far we are truly confronted with a ‘merely’ classical Leerstelle with all its prototypical and expected functions. The Leerstelle, the semantic blank between book I and II, however, is also repeated and foreshadowed on the level of discourse. Towards the end of book I, starting early on in the last chapter thereof, the setting becomes increasingly foggy and dark. This veil of darkness, on the one hand, enables the events of the last chapter of book I to happen undisturbed. On the other hand, this ‘veiling’ of the events makes it impossible to tell what actually happened – rape or seduction – and thus contributes greatly to the vagueness of description in this passage. Lastly, and most importantly, this increasing darkness can be seen as a gradual fading out of the discourse itself, eventually resulting in the Leerstelle which I have already comprehensively described. We can perhaps visualise the chapter as an inner movie, in which the events are continually faded out into a cut (the Leerstelle) between events, where the blackness is complete. The Leerstelle, in this way, becomes iconic in that it mirrors and completes what is taking place in the story: a gradual darkening, a growing uncertainty, resulting in complete, impermeable darkness – an absence which cannot be filled.
This stylistic preparation of the Leerstelle by both the construction of discourse as well as the events on the level of story is extremely consistent and, as I will show in the following, is by no means arbitrary and clearly contributing to the meaning of the story as a whole. By no means can this passage be read, as does Laura Claridge (1993: 63ff), as textually inconsistent with regards to the construction of Tess as a pure (or impure) woman, nor can the veiling of the events taking place be attributed to a “serious weakness of authorial control” (Claridge 1993: 65). Indeed, as will be shown promptly, nothing is meaningless in this particular passage of Hardy’s novel, and can, in fact, only be perceived as such if the significance of the absences displayed in this passage is taken into consideration.

As I have already mentioned, the absence of light enables the events of the story to take place. Thus, already very early on in the last chapter of book I, the “luminous fog, which had hung in the hollows all the evening became general and enveloped them.” (Tess: 61, emphasis mine). This general fog on the one hand causes Tess to not perceive that they have already passed the right crossing, and on the other figuratively hugs Tess and Alec, veiling them from the outside world. When Tess discovers that they have reached the forest, she cannot leave on foot as “in this growing fog [she] might wander for hours among the trees.” (Tess: 62, emphasis mine). Thus Tess becomes dependant on Alec’s support, while the darkness becomes ever denser. By the time Alec leaves to investigate their current position, “the webs of vapour” have “by this time formed veils between the trees”, (Tess: 64) the moon sets and “the pale light lessen[s]”, (Tess: 64) and once Alec returns the “moon [has] quite gone down, and partly on account of the fog The Chase was wrapped in thick darkness [...]” (Tess: 64). The “growing fog” (Tess: 62) and the resulting increasing darkness thus gradually fade out the surroundings of the forest on the story level, effectively preparing and supporting the discursive Leerstelle which is yet to follow. Additionally, the fading out of light – and all its connotations of purity, morality, etc. – supports the central question of purity vs. impurity, and leaves the necessary ambivalence intact. Nobody can see in the almost complete darkness, thus the events truly taking place – be them seduction or rape – are shut out from the reader’s eye. Absence thus pervades this passage on all levels, discourse and story alike, all supporting not only the reader’s imagination and suspense of the novel, but also the central question of whether or not Tess is a pure woman.

Although what has been discussed already is clearly sufficient to emphasise the significance of absences (both textual and metaphorical, such as the absence of light or the possibility of onlookers either to hinder Alec from raping Tess or to witness Tess falling prey
to Alec’s seductive schemes), we must, indeed, focus on yet another ‘fading into darkness’, another vanishing and resulting absence, namely the one of Tess herself. As the darkness grows and the plot thickens, Tess becomes increasingly immaterial, a fact which has also been observed by J. Hillis Miller (1987: 61ff.). As Alec leaves to explore their location, due to the lack of moonlight Tess becomes “invisible” (Tess: 64). When Alec returns, he can “see absolutely nothing but a pale nebulousness at his feet, which represented the white muslin figure he had left upon the dead leaves. Everything else was blackness.” (Tess: 64). What can be witnessed thus is a transformation (and fading away) of Tess from invisible to a “pale nebulousness”, something almost immaterial, yet more object than person. What is fading away, however, is not the figure of Tess herself, but more metaphorically the maiden Tess used to be, but will not continue to be as, although as of yet “blank as snow” (Tess: 65), this blank will soon be overwritten by “the course pattern [it] was doomed to receive.” (Tess: 65). Therefore, there is yet another thematisation of fading away and resulting absence to be found in the passage. Thus, the theme of loss/increasing darkness is once more repeated, creating an incredibly complex whole centred around absence (of light/morality, the reader’s eye, and text), ultimately culminating in the Leerstelle.

In conclusion it can thus be said that the discursive Leerstelle between book I and II of Tess of the d’Urbervilles is highly significant not only in the conventional sense of activating the reader and enhancing the suspense of the novel, but also foreshadowed and mirrored on the level of story. Visually, the fog and gradually fading light result eventually in the total blackness of the Leerstelle. The encompassing darkness of the Leerstelle can, however, not be represented with blackness in the novel itself. Instead, the blank white page at the ending of the chapter represents, paradoxically, the complete absence and blackness that has been built up throughout the last chapter of book one. The semantic Leerstelle, in this way, is then mirrored visually in the form of the blank page between the chapters. This can be read as a miming of the semantic Leerstelle on the level of discourse – semantic absence co-occurs with the absence of discourse. This absence – the blank page – thus repeats the Leerstelle iconically, emphasising the theme of absence/loss even more strongly. Additionally, Tess’ previous self is metaphorically gradually fading away (or being taken from her) as well, resulting in Tess as a figurative blank to be written anew during both the semantic blank in the form of the Leerstelle (and thus by the reader’s imagination) as well as the textual blank itself. Thus, all possible factors of the text, or more significantly all absences made significant in this passage, contribute to the overall aesthetic and metaphoric whole, thus
rendering the various absences of the passage highly significant. Moreover, the absences found in this passage of Tess of the d’Urbervilles are partly rendered iconically in that a gradual fading out of light is mimed iconically on the level of discourse, where the discourse is ‘fading out’ resulting in a paradoxical ‘blackness’, namely the blank page between the chapters. The Leerstelle, thus, is not only a means of classical limiting the flow of information, but also is foreshadowed and finally rendered in an iconic way as it becomes tangible in the visual blank at the end of the chapter. Absences, therefore, loom large on various levels of the novel and should clearly be taken into consideration upon a thorough analysis thereof.

3.2. Leerstellen Created by Limited Narration in James Joyce, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, and William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury

As we have seen in the discussion of the Leerstelle in Tess of the d’Urbervilles, the Leerstelle was not only a semantic but also a textual blank. For a Leerstelle to be effective and meaningful, this textual blank can, however, be absent as well. What results is a merely semantic blank, or a purely semantic Leerstelle, which nonetheless serves the same purposes of reader activation, as well as enhancement of suspense and reader imagination. These purely semantic blanks, albeit never explicitly spelled out (thus not visually absent from the text) are common where, due to restraints in the perception of a figural narrator, the narration as a whole is limited in its certainty and clarity. Limited perspective, therefore, clearly challenges the reader to make sense of the story-world surrounding the focaliser figure. To illustrate this point I would like to analyse two examples, the beginning of Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, where the fictional world is perceived through the eyes of a child, and Faulkner’s first book of The Sound and the Fury, where the semantics are clearly riddled by Benji’s handicapped narrative voice.

As already mentioned, Joyce’s Portrait begins with early childhood memories of the protagonist Stephen Dedalus. Presented with a world rendered through a child’s eyes the reader is at first confronted with a literary environment that is far from chronologically ordered or fully explicable outside the events of the whole novel. What results is, on the one hand, a discourse filled with semantic gaps, which, albeit not marked by a textual absence, increases the reader’s attention to detail and activates the reader’s innate urge for sense-making. On the other hand, it would be wrong to describe the first few pages of the novel as
arbitrarily pieced together. On the contrary, the beginning of the Portrait is a cleverly crafted pastiche of a child’s impressions which not only involve many senses, but also subtly introduce the novel’s main themes. As complicated and frustrating the beginning of the novel might be for a first time reader, the opening pages of the novel are nonetheless a great example for semantic blanks contributing to a novel as a whole.

Let us take a closer look on the mentioned opening pages of Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Curiously, the novel begins with the well-established fairy-tale formula “Once upon a time”, (Portrait: 5) forcing the reader – as he finds out belatedly -- to enter the novel on the hypo-diegetic level. Conventionally, a novel’s beginning would introduce both the temporal and spatial setting, thus creating a framework for the reader’s orientation within the story to follow. This orientation is denied to the reader of the Portrait. Instead of being provided with a clear setting, we are confronted with a story told on the hypo-diegetic level, postponing the questions of where and when to a later date, albeit attention is drawn to both questions nonetheless. The passage continues on the hypo-diegetic level for a few lines: “Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo....” (Portrait: 5). It becomes instantly obvious that the unusual beginning of the novel on the hypo-diegetic level is not the only problem of reception. Besides the visual, supplemented blank at the end of the passage (“...”), a phenomenon which shall be examined more closely later on in this paper, the perhaps most noticeable aspect is that the discourse which is presented is clearly not rendered for an adult reader, but rather reflecting child-directed speech, or the way language is represented in a child’s own mind. This can be seen in the passage by the choice of words, the many repetitions as well as the lack of punctuation. The same features which mark the passage as child-directed (or, respectively, as retold in a child’s mind) also suggest that the first few lines of the Portrait might be oral discourse, so to speak a story simultaneously told as it is read. The lack of quotation marks, however, makes it impossible to prove that this is the case. Moreover, it remains unclear who is speaking in the first paragraph of the novel. “His father told him that story [...]” (Portrait: 5), the passage continues. This suggests on the one hand, that his father might be telling the story simultaneously to the moment the reader enters the novel, thus perceiving the story in at the same time (and the same way) as Stephen does at this very moment. Reading the passage this way puts the reader on the same experiential level as Stephen himself, thus clearly enhancing the experientiality of the novel. A different reading, however, is also possible: the story told
at the beginning of the novel does not necessarily have to be told by Stephen’s father, but can also be re-told by Stephen as a figural narrator. This uncertainty, however, contributes to the lack of a clearly defined communicative situation in the text. Not only does the reader have to piece together what is happening where, but also who is actually speaking.

The next problem is that the following pages of the novel are not connected by conventional, logical means. Rather, the discourse is navigated by sensory associations. The novel, if we read the first paragraph as actually being told to Stephen, is an auditory perception. The story, at some point or another, was told to Stephen by his father, which prompts young Stephen into the visual perception of his father’s “hairy face” (*Portrait*: 5). Stephen’s attention does not linger on his father’s looks for long, however, but swiftly returns to the story again, this time with Stephen identifying himself as baby tuckoo witnessing the moocow coming down the road where Betty Byrne lived, a woman who sold lemon platt. It is unclear whether Betty Byrne is an actual person woven into the stories told to young Stephen (or, with Stephen as an immature but already budding artist, ‘fictionalised’ by himself) or a purely fictional character featured merely in a tale. This, once more, opens a semantic blank which cannot be fully explained but nonetheless engages the reader in the question of ‘Who is Betty Byrne’. Whoever the woman might be, she seems to prompt Stephen’s mind into another auditory perception, namely that of a song, which is then promptly rendered through Stephen’s childish mind and tongue: “*O the geen wothe botheth*” (*Portrait*: 5). This rendering not only emphasises Stephen’s own perception, but also enables the reader to experience what is presented in the same way Stephen does. The acoustic perception is then promptly followed by the missing olfactory and tactile perceptions: “When you wet the bed it is warm then it gets cold. [tactile] His mother put on the oilsheet. That had the queer smell [olfactory]. His mother had a nicer smell than his father. She played on the piano the sailor’s hornpipe for him to dance.[auditory]” (*Portrait*: 5). Here the senses are also used as elements connecting the discourse: the impression of one smell, leads to the smell of Stephen’s mother and father, which then consequently can lead to another song (and auditory perception).

It is essential to note that all these sensory perceptions do not only structure the discourse in a stream of consciousness, but are also favoured over actual descriptions or explanations. This has two effects: firstly, the emphasis of the novel is moved from understanding/being told to experiencing. This experience is on par with Stephen’s own experience, thus enabling the reader to identify with Stephen’s perceptions, consequently enhancing the immersion in the novel (aesthetic illusion) and the identification with the protagonist alike (which can be
argued to be a sub-function of the aesthetic illusion). Secondly, this focus on experience creates blanks in the story as the how?, why?, who? and what? are often not explicitly mentioned and merely hinted at, therefore leaving the reader challenged with the task of creating coherence utilising whatever hints are dropped.

Stephen as a protagonist, being an all-experiencing child who is not yet spurred by the need of logically explaining events, however, at times leaves the reader with pitifully little information. This can perhaps be seen most clearly in the rapid introduction of characters that are not described in any detail. Thus, Uncle Charles and Dante are merely mentioned without any explanation other than being older than Stephen’s parents. We can conclude that Uncle Charles belongs to the family, and that Dante is most likely a good friend of the family, but none of this is explicitly mentioned. The same goes for the mentioning of the Vances who “lived in number 7” (Portrait: 5), directing the reader to identify them as neighbours of the Dedalus family. Apparently, the Vances have a daughter named Eileen, whose mentioning leads to a huge semantic blank that needs to be unravelled by activating contextual knowledge: “When they were grown up he [Stephen] was going to marry Eileen. He hid under the table. His mother said: /-- O, Stephen will apologise.” (Portrait: 6). The fact that Stephen apparently needs to apologise for wanting to marry the girl next door appears puzzling at first. It can, however, be unravelled by applying one of the main themes of the novel to the passage, namely the theme of religion, or more accurately the one of Catholicism vs. Protestantism. Stephen is raised in a Catholic family, and Eileen is presumably a Protestant, thus rendering a union between the two undesirable for Stephen’s family.

In the same implicit way as the theme of religion is introduced in the opening pages of the Portrait, the other main themes are laid bare. The theme of family by making his relatives the centre of Stephen’s world. The theme of Ireland conflicts and nationalism by mentioning the political figures of Michael Davitt and Parnell. The theme of sensuality (which will be later explored also, but not exclusively, in the theme of sexuality) by focusing on all the senses as has been described above. Lastly, the theme of artistry by making Stephen not only a receptacle of all sorts of songs, stories and poems but also constructing him as a budding artist who sings, dances, and repeats as well as interprets the stories told to him.

All this is done not by actually telling the reader, but rather by utilising semantic blanks and dropping hints that direct the (activated) reader to extract the information from what little there is to work with. This results on the one hand in an emphasis on experientiality, and on
the other in the functions of a classical Leerstelle (namely activation of the reader and his imagination, as well as an increase in interest and suspense). Although it might be argued that the amount of semantic blanks in the first few pages is outrageous and more likely to frustrate the reader than activate him, it is important to note that this possible frustration is by no means arbitrary but rather to be attributed to the historical context of the novel: one of the main features of the Modern novel is an increase in elitism, creating an implied reader more capable of co-constructing the text. Thus, the possible frustration is not a sign of over-utilising the functions of semantic blanks, but rather a result of the aesthetic norms of the time.

The same game of presenting the reader with not textually marked semantic blanks (or Leerstellen) is skilfully played by William Faulkner in the first book of his novel The Sound and the Fury. Here, the discourse is riddled by the fact that the first person narrator, Benjy, is mentally handicapped and lacks every conception of time, thus making it extremely difficult to grasp the events taking place in the novel. The result is a cluster of memories centred on Benjy’s sister Caddy – who is, at this point of the temporal setting, curiously absent from the story level – interspersed only by sparse events actually taking place on the story level: it is Benjy’s thirty-third birthday, and Luster, one of the family’s slaves, is taking Benjy to search for his lost coins. In the process of the search, the two of them re-visit places Benjy has visited with Caddy in the past, thus prompting him into memories of his sister. These memories, however, are not ‘properly’ narrated in a fashion that makes them easy to understand – Benjy, as a narrator, is very much what Robert Wilhelm Weber (1969: 31) calls a “Kamera ohne Kameramann” – a camera without a camera-man. Things happen to Benjy, but he cannot make sense of them in a rational way. He can witness changes in Caddy, but he cannot morally judge them: he simply realises that he dislikes it if his sister does not smell like trees anymore (her state of innocence) and, growing up into a rather promiscuous young woman, smells like perfume. Past and present, similarly, is one for Benjy – it does not make a difference whether events take place in the here and now or in the depths of his convoluted memory. Benjy does not comprehend himself as a person – he has no real personality, and all the events he narrates are externalised (resulting in a complete and utter lack of internal events or comment). He is being talked about without realising it is him who is the subject of a conversation. He sees things come and go, without understanding that people take them or replace them. When it gets dark, the room vanishes, when it gets light again it reappears: in short, Benjy’s narration is no narration in the common sense, but rather an arbitrary pastiche.
of scenes and memories, events taking place in a ‘mysterious’, and for the logical reader highly unusual, manner.

What is, then, most obviously absent from the first book of *The Sound and the Fury*, is a semantic, guiding framework enabling the reader to make sense of what events are taking place – or even when they are happening. The narration is riddled by (unmarked) semantic blanks, rendering it close to impossible to fully comprehend what is going on in the novel upon the first perusal of the novel. It would be wrong, however, to attribute these absences to a mere attempt of telling a story through the eyes of a mentally handicapped person. As Weber (1969: 31ff.) also observed, such an attempt at a ‘psychologically realistic’ representation of the mind of an idiot is unlikely because Benjy is utterly incapable of representing anything. His thoughts are focussed on his sister Caddy alone, and whenever his memories of her are interrupted all he does is howl. Benjy does not – and cannot – communicate. This lack of communicative ability, however, is not limited to his caretakers. On the contrary, it clearly includes the fictional communication to the reader. The option of experimentally presenting and representing the consciousness of a handicapped person in a novel therefore seems highly unlikely – for how can a consciousness that is utterly absent be represented? What appears likelier is that the absence of a clear narrative and semantic framework is to be attributed to the fact that the implied author deliberately challenges the reader into filling in the gaps of the narration. This, of course, throws us back at the primary functions of Iser’s *Leerstelle*: reader activation, increase of suspense and experientiality. Indeed, after reading the first book of the novel, the reader is extremely eager to be handed the tools to join the few pieces of the puzzle he has been able to uncover so far. Interestingly, *The Sound and the Fury* is also structured accordingly. While the first book is extremely hard to make sense of, the succeeding books become gradually easier in reception. What has been deliberately left blank in the first book, is partly unravelled in book two and three, and finally completed in the last book. Thus the actually rather simple story is told and re-told from various perspectives, starting with Benjy’s, gaining more and more clarity as the novel progresses. This gradual phasing of clarity, however, should by no means be seen as arbitrary. Rather, it is to be identified as a deliberate deferral of the unravelling of events, as well as a suspense-enhancing delay in the reader’s sense-making.

That said, it is important to note that the absences in this first book of *The Sound and the Fury* are by no means limited to the semantic blanks created by the limited perspective of the first-person narrator, as well as his incapability to differentiate between past and present as
shall be discussed shortly. The absences, in addition, seem to be quite omnipresent: Benjy’s object of obsession, his sister Caddy, only exists in his memories but is, asides that, absent from the events taking place at the time on the level of story. Furthermore, Benjy’s consciousness is an empty canvas only filled by his various perceptions. In addition, Benjy is not only unaware of logical circumstances or the people around him, he is also incapable of identifying himself as an individual, which is perhaps most clearly reflected in the fact that his name is changed from Maury to Benjy without him even realising that this change refers to his person. Lastly, absences are also reflected on the level of discourse. There is a lack of conjunctions pervading the first part of the novel, sentences are short, repetitious and often incomplete – thus iconically mirroring Benjy’s lack of communication on the level of discourse. What results is a framework of absences rather than tangible facts, which weave a riddled picture of the events taking place which, without the willing participation of the reader, makes little to no sense.

After this preamble, let us now examine these absences in closer detail, starting with the perhaps most striking blanks caused by Benjy’s incapability of narrating the events as belonging to the past and present. The novel opens at April Seventh, 1929, in medias res, with Benjy peering “Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces,” where he “could see them hitting” (TSATF: 11). Neither do we know who ‘them’ is, nor are we aware of why or what they are hitting. The reader is thus immediately thrown into the complicated mind of Benjy, and already on the first page of the novel confronted with the difficulty of making sense of Benjy’s narration. Only a few lines down the page, the mentioning of a flag that is being removed and replaced, the taking turns of ‘them’ with the hitting, a “caddie” (TSATF: 11) being addressed and lastly the mentioning of balls slowly unravels the fact that we are witnessing a game of golf. Suffice to say that this passage sets the mood and tone for the rest of the novel: no passage in the first book will be clear and straight-forward, and always be in need of the reader’s participation in constructing the events.

The fence through which Benjy observes the golf-players, however, soon turns out to be significant. At an unspecified time in the past, Benjy was at the same place with his sister Caddy, and got stuck climbing through the very same hole through which he will attempt to climb presently. Luster and Benjy, in the present “[...]went along the fence and came to the garden fence, where [their] shadows were.” (TSATF: 12). As they go through the “broken place” (TSATF: 12), Benjy gets caught on a protruding nail, something that seems to happen to him every time. This getting stuck in the hole prompts the first memory of Caddy who
helped Benjy through the hole on a previous occasion: ‘“Wait a minute.’ Luster said. ‘You snagged on that nail again. Can’t you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail.’ / Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through.” (TSATF: 12). As Michaela Ulich (1972: 24) argues, the transition from present to past is marked by italicising the ‘memory’ text, but other than that lacks any form of orientation or connection. Italic print, even though any other form of orienting framework is lacking, is nonetheless conventionally used for the expression of thoughts, feelings or memories, thus giving the reader a hint that italic passages are ‘memory’ passages. Therefore, an attentive reader is enabled to work out that a jump from regular to italic print signifies also a lapse from present story to memory.

The division between past (italics) and present (regular print) is, however, not as clear cut or even consistent. Already this first passage neglects the italics/regular print rule the reader might have extracted only moments before: “*Keep your hands in your pockets, Caddy said. Or they’ll get froze. You don’t want your hands froze on Christmas do you. / It’s too cold out there.*’ Versh said. ‘You don’t want to go out doors.’” (TSATF: 12). The change from italic to regular print should signify a transition from past to present, but in this case it does not do so. Rather, the reader is thrown off-course by the sudden introduction of other characters, like Versh, and the mother who cannot be present at the time, as well as a sudden change in the spatial setting. Thus it becomes clear, that although the print signifies a change in time, the actual story does not lapse from past to present, but remains in the past with a different memory. The situation of lapsing between past and present becomes even more precarious, as fragments of the present begin to invade the memories (or vice versa), for instance in the following passage, which takes place in a memory: “We went back. ‘You must think.’ Mother said. *Hold still now* Versh said. He put my overshoes on. ‘Someday I’ll be gone, and you’ll have to think for him.’ *Now stomp* Versh said.” (TSATF: 15). Regularly printed are the events of the past, the instructions in italics seem to curiously belong to both past and present: it is, on the one hand, an utterance made in the past by Versh and, simultaneously, instructions given by Luster in the present. This confusion, alongside the fact that passages happening in the present are italicised as well (for instance on page 14), make a differentiation between past and present exceedingly difficult. This tendency of ‘simultanising’ past and present is furthermore strengthened by fragmenting both the level of presence and the level of memory, leaving only shards of events: “I hushed and got in the water [present event] and Roskus came and said to come to supper and Caddy said, / ‘It’s not supper time yet. I’m not going. [past event] / She was wet [past event].’” (TSATF: 23). This
passage clearly shows that Benjy’s perception of past and present is undifferentiated. Only signified by the use of italics, the scene switches from present to past **mid-sentence**. The scene, however, does not shift back to present events with end of the italics print, but remains in the past, if in a different memory.

This complication of the time-levels clearly challenges the reader to question the events taking place on a regular basis. Even the little orienting framework that is given, namely the use of italics and regular print, is unreliable and inconsistent in that italics and regular print do not simply signify ‘past’ and ‘present’, but rather a change in events. What results are fuzzy borders between past and present, with partly overlapping time-levels, which leave a blank in the reader’s sense-making, forcing the reader to newly consider either form of print as it occurs. While this technique clearly increases and even forces the reader’s participation, the seeming arbitrariness of italic and regular print also, and maybe more importantly, iconically mirror Benjy’s incapability of differentiating between past and present. To Benjy, present and past is one, everything happens simultaneously, there is no timeline that aids his orientation, and with that there can be no clear-cut framework to aid the reader’s perception of the novel. The reader, by these means, is thrown into a world where the distinction between past and present is **absent**. This, in addition to Benjy’s general inability of relating events in a logical or conventional manner, results in a highly fragmented patchwork of scenes and impressions happening more or less simultaneously, waiting to be pieced together by the willing reader.

In a similar fashion as the distinction between past and present is absent, general logical coherence is also absent from the first book of the novel. Benjy’s mind is triggered by one thing and then another, jumps from the mentioned hole in the fence in the present to the past, to a completely different scene evolving around Caddy. While the connections make sense on a sensual level – memories and events triggered by sounds, smells, visuals – the description of events is often highly unusual and limited in its signification. Benjy cannot distinguish between (passive) objects and (active) characters, and he cannot rationally conclude that sometimes persons can do something to objects in order to influence them. Something is, and then it is different. The perhaps most enlightening example for this limitation of Benjy’s narration is one of the many instances where Benjy is fed: “Steam came off of Roskus. He was sitting in front of the stove. The oven door was open and Roskus had his feet in it. Steam came off the bowl. Caddy put the spoon into my mouth easy. There was a black spot on the inside of the bowl” (*TSATF*: 68). The steam is simply there, and not caused by the heat of the
food and the kitchen. The black spot in the bowl is simply there, and not brought into relation with Benjy being fed, and thus the bowl gradually emptied: “It got down below the mark. Then the bowl was empty. It went away. [...] The bowl came back. I couldn’t see the spot. Then I could.” (TSATF: 68-69). Describing a bowl being refilled and then again emptied in this way is certainly unusual, if apt as to the way Benjy’s mind works. It is the bowl that moves, as if out of its own will, and then returns. In other words, there is no connection between people doing something and inanimate objects being moved around. The same is true whenever a room becomes dark: “Then they all stopped and it was dark, and when I stopped to start again [howling] I could hear Mother, and feet came, walking fast away, and I could smell it. Then the room came, but my eyes went shut.” (TSATF: 37). As it gets light again, it is the room that comes back, and there is no connection between the light coming back and the ability to see the room. Objects thus act like animate entities, and are, moreover, not truly distinguished from living persons. The room vanishes and reappears, just as the feet come and go, as the spoon moves to and fro the bowl that is at one instance full and at the other empty.

This, of course, complicates the reception even further. Not only are the time-levels intrinsically confused, also the events taking place are related in a fashion that challenges the reader to make sense of them continually. In the same way as the absence of a clear-cut distinction between past and present is missing, the distinction between object and character is likewise blurred. In this way, Benjy’s monologue throws the reader into a world that, measured with conventional means, does not make sense and is thus constantly pre-occupied with the task of filling in the semantic gaps left behind by a narrative agency that is incapable of even realising them.

In this way, the whole first book functions like a large, unmarked Leerstelle. Extremely put, what we can see is one giant absence that is interspersed by fragments of actions and memories, which, as more or less isolated and unconnected elements, need to be joined into a whole. This constantly challenges the reader to make sense of what is happening, to piece together the bits and pieces handed to him. Thus challenged, the reader’s willing participation is perpetually required, the reader’s imagination and involvement in the unusual surrounding of a handicapped mind constantly activated. Moreover, the ‘suspense’ – by which I mean the intellectual enjoyment of making sense of only a few bits of information -- is gradually enhanced by the absence of any explanation of the events taking place in the novel. By the end of the first book, we have merely managed to collect a few, loosely connected fragments
which give us a vague idea of what happened, but which nonetheless leave us in the dark as to the how and why. Presupposing a willing reader, by the end of the first book of the novel the intellectual suspense has been heightened to the maximum bearable – the willingness of the reader to participate in the co-construction of the text has reached its limit -- and the eagerness to learn about the events in a more conventional, rational fashion has reached its peak. Thus, choosing a handicapped first-person narrator enables the implied author to immerse the implied reader in a novel that only gradually becomes more and more clear while constantly keeping the reader’s participation extremely high.

While all these are certainly important functions of the most prominent absences in the first book of *The Sound and the Fury*, there are also other, equally as significant absences yet to be discussed. The fact that the main protagonist of the novel, Caddy, is completely missing is already telling. This absence of the central figure enables a characterisation that is purely done by the other narrative voices of the novel, in my example the one of Benjy. These voices, however, are only of questionable reliability and in Benjy’s case free of any evaluation: he blindly loves his sister, he knows what he likes and dislikes her doing, but he is incapable of making a moral statement about her promiscuity and resulting trouble. This unreliability enables the implied reader to, only loosely guided by the narrative voices themselves as well as a subtle direction of sympathies, make up his own mind about questions of morality and the decay of Southern American old families which are central to the novel. Thus, Caddy’s absence is significant in that the resulting blank asks to be filled in by the reader’s own judgement and thoughts, as particularly in Benjy’s case no entirely accurate worldview can be constructed by relying on the narration alone. At the same time, constructing Caddy as a blank, she can also function as a ‘placeholder’, a model, for other young girls in similar positions: the blank ‘Caddy’ can be filled by other people, thus rendering Caddy, through her absence, into a sort of ‘Everyman’.

In a similar way as Caddy is completely absent from the events of April Seventh, 1927, and therefore unable to speak for herself, it can be argued that Benjy is absent as well. On the one hand, Benjy is a first person narrator who is “given no interior consciousness.” (Swiggart 1962: 70). This lack of consciousness enables Benjy to function as a detached camera eye while, paradoxically, he remains a first-person narrator. This detachment of an inner consciousness or personality enables Benjy to relate events while perpetuating the complete and utter absence of an interior world: “There is no interior world at all in Benjy’s monologue; everything is externalised.” (Swiggart 1962: 65). Thus, Benjy very much
functions as an empty canvas, a mere observer of events which, once more, leave the
evaluation of the actual story up to the reader. Benjy, in a metareferential way, can be read as
a narrative authority that is paradoxically both, a formal first person narrator who relates his
tale in a fashion that is more common to third person narration, particularly as achieved by
the camera eye technique. Thus the opposition of clear-cut narratorial terms is weakened
significantly. In this way, the absence of a marked distinction between first and third person
narration emphasises the increasing distrust in realistic discourse as starting in Modernism
and peaking in Post-Modernism, while at the same time foregrounding the subjectivity of
experience, even the one of narratorial discourse. The same metareferential gesture can be
seen in what Ulich identifies as an encompassing narrative passivity and a complete negation
of the act of narration itself (cf. Ulich 1972: 27). In that way, Benjy himself becomes a
(metareferential) blank foregrounding the discourse by denying narratorial norms, as well as
a canvas enabling the reader to effectively participate in and co-construct the text.

Whether or not we attribute this metareferential function to Benjy as a narrating I, the
absence of Benjy as a person in the stricter sense is glaringly obvious. Benjy, unable to
understand himself as an individual, is reduced to mere observer throughout the whole first
book. People are talking about him, without Benjy noticing that he is the subject of the
conversation. Additionally, there is no difference if people talk to Benjy, for Benjy does not
distinguish between being talked to and being talked about. This inability of comprehending
himself as an individual entity – or a character, to put it more strongly – can perhaps best be
seen in Benjy’s change of name.

Throughout the first book of the novel we learn in some memory fragments that at some
point in time Benjy was called Maury. Presumably because of Uncle Maury’s adulterous and
immoral affair – a fact that is only hinted at and can be extrapolated from conversation
fragments – Benjy was christened differently. While this episode is remarkable as it stands, it
is even more interesting that Benjy is completely unaware that this rather significant change
in personal identity refers to him. Thus Benjy, in his role as unreflecting, narratively muted
entity simply overhears conversations about the subject in the same way as he listens in to
what is going on around him at all times: “That’s right, Dilsey said. I reckon it’ll be my time
to cry next. Reckon Maury going to let me cry on him a while, too. / His name’s Benjy now,
Caddy said.” (TSATF: 58). Not only does Benjy not react to the change in his identity, the
absence of a clear statement that Benjy’s name was changed leads to some confusion as to
who is who – Maury, until this point, was simply Uncle Maury. Now the reader learns that
Benjy was also Maury at some point. This game of confusing the reader as to which character is speaking or talked about is repeated with the two Quentins. First, Quentin is Caddy’s other brother who idealises and adores her. Second, there is also Miss Quentin – often simply referred to as ‘Quentin’ – who is Caddy’s daughter. This not only leads to some confusion and a resulting increased alertness in the reader, but also hints towards the fact that in a way the characters – all belonging to the same old, decaying family – are exchangeable. This, in a way sets up Uncle Maury – adulterous and immoral – as almost equally as insane as Benjy. Benjy, however, frozen in a state of infantile innocence and a lack of capability of being immoral, cannot retain the name Maury. This is why Caddy explains to Dilsey that “Benjamin came out of the Bible, [...]. It’s a better name for him [Benjy] than Maury was.” (TSATF: 58).

For whatever reasons Benjy’s name was or had to be changed, the simple fact that Benjy cannot comprehend his name as a part of his identity remains. This is perhaps best expressed in Caddy’s futile attempts of teaching Benjy his new name: “Your name is Benjy. Caddy said. Do you hear. Benjy. Benjy.” (TSATF: 60). Caddy’s well-meant wish of guiding Benjy into comprehending himself as ‘Benjy, the person’ is, however, doomed to fail. For how could Benjy possibly comprehend that he is now Benjy when before he did not know that he was Maury, or any individual person at all? Therefore, Benjy remains the perhaps biggest blank in the first book of the novel: an ‘empty’ narrator without any internal world or consciousness, or even comprehension of himself as a narrator or person.

It has thus become evident that the first book of Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury is utilising absences in manifold and effective ways. Not only is Joyce’s ‘child-narrator’ topped with an extremely incapable narrating I, the first person narrator of The Sound and the Fury is also a blank himself as has been described above. Absence of conventionally meaningful discourse co-occurs with the absence of conventionally meaningful characters, be it Caddy as an external character or Benjy, who lacks character due to his mental limitations. All these forms of absences contribute to the novel in the outlined ways, but there is one last absence that has so far been neglected, namely a classical Leerstelle at the end of the first chapter.

The first book ends with Benjy falling asleep. What follows is a giant gap in the narration: we move from April Seventh, 1927, to June Second, 1910. This means that without warning or explanation the reader is propelled 17 years into the past. Additionally and without transition, there is a change in narrative voice that is not marked at all. While the discourse
changes as Quentin takes over as a narrator, this is only an insufficient hint for the reader to learn that there is a new narrator in town. It is only a few lines down the second chapter that we learn that it is Quentin’s narration, and then only because Quentin is being addressed by his father directly (in a memory, but nonetheless). This Leerstelle has of course all the classical implications of reader-activation and preservation/enhancement of the challenge to make sense of the text, which results in the intellectual suspense of unravelling an intricate story by the force of the mind. It is furthermore remarkable, however, as the two ends of the Leerstelle are connected and the Leerstelle is, similarly to the one in Tess of the d’Urbervilles foreshadowed by a ‘fading out’ of the scenery of the first book.

For this effect, Benjy’s vision is gradually ‘blackened’. “Father went to the door and looked at us again. Then the dark came back, and he stood black in the door, and then the door turned black again.” (TSATF: 72). First, light is shining through the door, then the lights are extinguished, then the door is close – all of which leads to an increasing darkness in the room Benjy is currently in. The passage continues:

“Caddy held me and I could hear us all, and the darkness, and something I could smell. And then I could see the windows, where the trees were buzzing. Then the dark began to go in smooth, bright shapes, like it always does, even when Caddy says that I have been asleep.” (TSATF: 72).

The darkness thus becomes complete when Benjy closes his eyes and falls asleep, even though he is experiencing it in bright shapes. Whereas the end of the first book fades out the scenery by making Benjy fall asleep, the beginning of the second book fades in by awaking Quentin, thus further complicating the change in narrative voice: “WHEN the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtains it was between seven and eight o’clock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch.” (TSATF: 73). While one person falls asleep, another sleeper awakes, leaving a blank in the discourse on the one hand, but also connecting the two books in a rather unusual fashion. This connection, however, is not as much a red string through the novel as it contributes to the effects caused by the Leerstelle; it does not explain, but emphasises the lack of information and the abrupt and unmarked switch from one narrator to the other.

In this way it can be said that The Sound and the Fury surpasses what Joyce has done at the beginning of The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. The limited viewpoint of the
narrators results in unmarked Leerstellen which leave clear gaps in the narrative discourse and therefore activate the reader’s imagination as well as participation. Both novels are excellent examples of Leerstellen that are not marked in the discourse by chapter or book endings, but which pervade the narration on a constant basis due to limitations within the narrative voices. Additionally, both novels show a great attention to absences of various forms and functions and thus clearly illustrate that absences in literature are, indeed, no subject to be neglected in a thorough analysis.


While prose appears to lend itself more willingly to the application of classical Leerstellen, semantic blanks can – and do – also occur in poetry. This is perhaps most obvious in poems exhibiting a more narrative content, but could also be argued to be found in, for instance, a sudden change in emotional description or mood as such an abrupt transition would leave out the semantic explanation of the why and how. For my examination of Leerstellen in poetry I have, however, chosen two rather classical examples, namely Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” and T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Although the poems are taken from the Romantic and Modern period respectively, they nonetheless share the quality of sporting Leerstellen in their course – and, most remarkably, Leerstellen that seems to have a similar function in both poems.

Let us, at first, focus on the older poem of them, Coleridge’s famous “Kubla Khan”. “Kubla Khan” is a poem Coleridge, in his preface to the poem, claims to have written after experiencing a vision in a dreamlike state of mind. After awaking, Coleridge immediately set to writing his vision down, but was interrupted. Once he had attended to the business at hand, the vision had somewhat dulled and could not be re-constructed to the satisfaction of the poet. This has left us with a poem that is fragmentary (and, arguably, unmediated) in its character, which already renders the poem an obvious choice for my purposes. What is for the topic at hand most striking is, however, the fact that the poem consists of two different, seemingly unconnected parts. Firstly, there is the fictional setting and description of the vision: Kubla Khan decrees a highly symbolic pleasure dome which, in the following stanzas, is described
thoroughly. Secondly, the last stanza of the poem comprises a completely different and seemingly unconnected scene: the lyric I describes a damsel playing a dulcimer which leads him to metapoetic reflections about his own ‘song’ or poem.

The result is a Leerstelle between the greater first portion of the poem and the last stanza. Upon a first reading it is entirely unclear why the lyric I opts for a sudden shift in topic and scenery. The resulting semantic blank in the text is easily attributed to the fact that Coleridge, as he states himself in the preface to the poem, is simply attempting to reconstruct a by now already fragmented vision. This fragmentariness of the vision might also be the cause of the other, less prominent Leerstellen, namely unanswered questions of who Kubla Khan is, where the pleasure dome is situated, and how a pleasure dome can be “decreed” in the first place. Visions, however, are not bound by the usual conventions of logic and coherence. Dreams and visions can be fragmented, if imbued with symbolic meaning, and therefore a gap in the sparse narrative discourse of the poem can be easily ignored and discarded as meaningless. Even though the Leerstelle in this case might not be striking in the sense that additional meaning is created, it nonetheless can be said to mirror the fragmentariness of the vision on the level of the enounced. The real life interruption is then signified by the Leerstelle, as what might have filled the gap before has gotten irretrievably lost as Coleridge attended to his business and, while doing so, lost a clear recollection of the original vision.

A deeper reading of the poem, however, suggests that the Leerstellen in “Kubla Khan” might be more significant than is obvious at a first glance. Indeed, “Kubla Khan” is a highly metapoetic and multi-faceted poem in that it thematises the creative act as well as the Romantic Imagination at work. The creational act, however, is not always straightforward as the creative mind, or even inspiration itself might jump from one image to the next. This is perhaps why the poem is so full of absences: most parts of the pleasure-dome cannot be seen as they are hidden underneath the surface, and the closer circumstances of the creation of the pleasure dome are never related. A closer inspection of the metapoetic elements of the poem, however, enables the reader to illuminate the elements that are hidden from the eye.

The first creational act is accomplished by Kubla Khan himself and is the decree of the pleasure-dome. The configuration of the pleasure-dome is, however, highly metapoetic in itself. Alph, the sacred river, runs “through caverns measureless to man / down to a sunless sea” (ll. 4-5). The river can thus be easily read as the imaginative flow of the artist’s poetic (un-)consciousness, leading through, or stemming from, what was understood in
Romanticism as genuine inspiration. This inspiration, however, is “sunless” (l. 5), thus dark and not easily to be probed, and “measureless to man” (l. 4), not possible to be grasped by human reason. The spatial setting of the poem therefore becomes highly ambivalent: it is no longer merely the exact imitation of images seen in a vision, a more or less fantastic representation of Kubla Khan’s pleasure-dome, but also a landscape that is both created and creative at the same time. Kubla Khan, as the disposer of the pleasure-dome, decrees (metapoetically creates/writes) it, but he cannot control the primordial inspiration stemming from the sacred river as well as the places of his kingdom that are closed to the probing of the human mind. It is perhaps this lack of control, this inability to create a pleasure-dome by the means of will alone that leaves Kubla Khan anxious. Indeed, the imagery utilised in the following verses ranges from beautiful and idyllic to unsettling and awe-inspiring. Thus, the bright gardens and “incense-bearing tree[s]” (l. 9), the “forests ancient as the hills” (l. 10), the “sunny spots of greenery” (l. 11) of the first stanza are swiftly replaced by more haunting images in the second. Already at the beginning of the poem we are confronted with a “deep romantic chasm” (l. 12), which suggests that there is something brooding under the seemingly idyllic landscape. This impression is then emphasised by a variety of images; the setting becomes a “savage place” (l. 14), stressing the primordial and uncouth force of poetic inspiration, it is transformed from a rather (neo-)classical, aesthetic landscape to a place that is both “holy and enchanted” (l. 14), and even “haunted / By woman wailing for her demon-lover!” (ll. 15-16). It can be argued that the clearly neo-classically tinged landscape of the first stanza is replaced by a more Romantically fitting one in the second. We must not forget, however, that the landscape and spatial elements in the poem, however, also signify the creative process and the force of the Romantic Imagination. This imagination is unstructured and not to be controlled by aesthetic norms, it can be unsettling but is not to be understood as negative. The undercurrent of the ‘River of Imagination’, consequently, begins to break loose towards the second half of stanza two. From the chasm, “[...]with ceaseless turmoil seething / as if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing / A mighty fountain presently was forced” (ll. 17-20); in this fashion the inspiration forcefully erupts from the confines of the more controlled inspiring and creative environment of the poet’s creation. Significantly, the fountain contains also “Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail” (l. 21): these fragments can be read as the pieces of inspiration available to the poet, who does not possess the entire source of his vision but only a fragment. The fragmentariness of what is available to the creator is also reflected in the creation of the poem as a whole. If the poem is, however, a fragment this also means that the poem, per definition, must feature some sort of absence –
and indeed, “Kubla Khan” is not only concerned with absences and things hidden from the eye, but also features various Leerstellen, most prominently one between the last stanza of the poem and the one preceding it.

If this Leerstelle is not dismissed as arbitrary, which it should not be, the key to the function of the Leerstelle lies in what I have described above. The poem moves from one creator to another: in the first portion of the poem, Kubla Khan creates his meaning-bearing, metapoetic pleasure-dome. In the last stanza, the Abyssinian maid takes over the task. The poem, in this fashion, also moves from an inconspicuous, symbolic metapoetic setting to a more obvious one: the connections between music/song and poetry are conventionalised and well researched. The description of the Abyssinian maid and her song, however, swiftly propel the poem to the next creator: the poet himself. “Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song” (ll. 42-43) the lyric I ponders, thus foregrounding the problem of creation as well as the incompleteness of the representation of inspiration within the (poetic) work of art. The primordial force that had been seething underneath the surface for the course of the poem has erupted, but the representation is incomplete. Were the poetic I capable of faithfully reconstructing the Abyssinian maid’s song, he would be able to “[...] build that dome in air.” (l. 46). This, of course, is an obvious connection between the poet speaker and Kubla Khan creating the pleasure-dome in the first portion of the poem. Therefore, the figure of Kubla Khan can metapoetically be read as a creator-figure representing the inspired and creating poet himself in the pleasure-dome vision.

The Leerstellen of the poem – most prominently the one between the last two stanzas of the poem, but also the more general Leerstellen of the hows and whys of the creation of the pleasure dome – can be, therefore, explained in two different ways. Firstly, the Leerstelle could mirror the context of the poem: Coleridge was interrupted while writing “Kubla Khan”. Incapable of resuming the vision of the pleasure-dome after this interruption, the Leerstelle was created and followed by another thematising of the imagination/creation dilemma that is consistently foregrounded in the poem. Secondly, the Leerstelle can be read in a metapoetic way. Here the sudden blank between the description of the fictional landscape and the song of the Abyssinian maid iconically mimes the workings of the poet’s brain: at one second inspired, the Romantic Imagination of the poet requires him to move swiftly from one scene to another. The source of inspiration, which is the undercurrent of the whole poem (literally, in the form of the fountain and the sacred river), dictates what is written down and cannot be controlled by ‘poetic discipline’. The Leerstelle, in this fashion, continues the metapoetic
theme of the poem consequently: there is something measureless in the poem, something that is intangible and invisible, yet still present. The Leerstelle, thus, visualises and emphasises the absence of something solid; it, in a way, allows the readers to experience the inspiration imbu ed into the poet speaker themselves. Consequently, this leads to an increase in experientiality, as well as the classical reader activation as described by Iser.

Either way, the Leerstelle (as well as the general fragmentariness of the poem) should not be misinterpreted as a foregrounding of absence in the sense of lack or loss. On the contrary, as Fritz Gutbrodt (1990: 85-86) aptly puts it, what is lost in “Kubla Khan” also “[...]bear[s] the paradoxical promise that [it is] perhaps, not wholly lost to absence or non-existence.” The key to this analysis can be found in the preface to the poem (and, perhaps, also the Romantic mindset). Here Coleridge quotes Theocritus in a way that in translation means “I shall sing a sweeter song tomorrow” which is followed by a reference that tomorrow is yet to come. Therefore, the poem gains a whole new metapoetic dimension that does not foreground the problems of fickle inspiration and imagination, but the act of creation itself. This act of creation, however, is endless. The fact that there are lines missing in “Kubla Khan”, that the inspiration was so overwhelming and could not be recovered entirely, then becomes unimportant. For what is absent from the poem, what is hidden in between the lines (and similarly, under the obvious surface of the pleasure-dome itself) is still, at least as a promise of completeness, present. The poet’s duty is then to create and recreate, to be inspired and re-inspired in an endless circle. Some things are absent, leaving the poetic transcript incomplete, but this fragmentariness at the same time foregrounds the greatness and inconceivability of inspiration and imagination itself. Imagination thus becomes an endless source of poetic creation that can never be entirely captured or tamed, but which nonetheless provides for an endless amount of poetry. Therefore, “Kubla Khan”, by its fragmentariness and absences, emphasises the idea of an overwhelmingly present ‘whole’. The world is complete, even though the poetic artefact might not be.

This wholeness of the inspirational world will not be retained in the course of literary history, as the periods following Romanticism exhibited an increasing doubtfulness into a complete, unfragmented human being. Starting with the Modern Period, even language itself began to be seen as an unreliable means of relating means, thus rendering the act of literary creation increasingly difficult. This fragmentariness of the human being as well as the world around him is foregrounded in our next example, T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”. In “The Love Song”, J. Alfred Prufrock, lyric I and unlikely hero, narrates his
being plagued by the “overwhelming question” (e.g. l. 10, but repeatedly used in the poem) and his incapability of asking or even verbalising it. Prufrock is ageing and, rather remarkably, stuck in his inertia, constantly stressing that there is enough time to ask the question (or begin to understand the question in the first place) when actually there is not. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, in this sense, is not much of a love song, as love – or anything of depth – is never expressed. Prufrock himself, on the other hand, is an expression of the typical fragmented, incomplete, Modernist self: he has lost every belief in substantial values, he is incapable of expressing his feelings or even narrowing them down into something that is less vague than the overwhelming question he cannot and will not ask in the poem. In the same way, the constantly changing and temporally inconsistent landscape of Prufrock’s surroundings is fragmented in a similar way: it is an urban wasteland where nothing really is and nothing but the mundane ever happens. This fragmentariness is also mirrored on the level of enunciation by, firstly, introducing the poem as a clever pastiche of other poems and literature; thus intertextual fragments are introduced into the poem without lending the reader a supporting or explaining framework. This absence of explanation and presence of subtle hints towards the greater corpus of literature is, of course, a typical and well-discussed feature of Modernist literature: the absence of a guiding framework enhances the elitist quality of the poem, deliberately complicating the reception and, at same time, inviting the implied reader to make sense of the intertextual fragments. Indeed, this sense-making is enjoyable (if one is well-schooled enough in reading literature to understand the hints, that is) and certainly contributes greatly to the overall effect of “The Love Song” as well as to the one of Modernist literature as a whole.

These rather culturally epoch dependent and frequently discussed absences aside, there are, secondly, also typographic features that mark absences. These features include visual (if the poem is read) or auditory (if the poem is performed) blanks which shall be discussed in greater detail later on, but which need to be mentioned at that point nonetheless. These supplemented blanks occur usually in order to make room for thought, both within the fictional Prufrock himself as well as in the actual reader, as they are most commonly sported wherever there is something Prufrock cannot quite grasp or express. The first blank occurs directly after the first mentioning of the ‘overwhelming question’: “[...]To lead you to an overwhelming question... / Oh, do not ask what is it?” (ll. 10-11). Here the blank clearly refers to the overwhelming question which does not exist, only as a vague concept that can neither be grasped nor verbalised. Additionally, the absence of the actual question enhances
suspense and clearly increases curiosity within the implied reader who is, by then, confronted with his own ‘overwhelming question’, which is basically the question of what the overwhelming question is. Similar blanks are left in the further course of the poem. Comparably to the verses just discussed, visual, supplemented blanks occur when a concept is discussed that cannot be fully grasped or explained, for instance here: “I grow old...I grow old... / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled” (ll. 120-21). In these lines, the blanks on the one hand signify the complexity of the problem mankind is confronted with: growing old and inevitable death. Prufrock, who believes that there is still time, realises more and more that he is no longer young (there is a semantic absence of youth), thus there must be room left blank in order to allow both reader and Prufrock to grasp the concept of age. Moreover, the blank also serves the purpose of delaying the unsatisfying conclusion that follows promptly in the next verse-line, “I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled”. The blanks therefore allow a stylistic emphasis on the growing old part (as it is repeated two times and gains weight by the supplemented blanks), but also enable an increase in suspense as to the conclusion as to what old age means to Prufrock – and in logical consequence the reader – only to, in a typically Prufrockian manner, let the profound question puff into nothingness in the following line. In a way it can be said here that the supplemented blanks foreshadow the absence of meaning that follow in the next verse and which, undoubtedly, permeate the poem as a whole. The same use of supplemented blanks can be observed in the following passage: “Asleep...tired...or it malingers” (l. 77). Here again the thoughts are blanked out, there is no explanation as to what is going on in between the fragmented words. More importantly, the blanks here iconically mirror the state of drowsiness, the slowing of thought processes as the individual person becomes more and more tired.

We have thus already seen that absences and fragments are a significant part of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. Not only is the whole poem interspersed with intertextual fragments, it is also thematically concerned with the meaninglessness (the absence of meaning) and fragmentariness of the Modern world. A short detour into the world of supplemented blanks has shown that these blanks are present and meaningful in the poem. The most remarkable absences of “The Love Song” are, however, the Leerstellen left between several stanzas of the poem.

There is a total of three Leerstellen marked (in my edition) by a line of dots. Each of these Leerstellen introduces a sudden change in scenery, an abrupt shift from one image to the next. Every Leerstelle, comparably to the supplemented visual blanks discussed above, also
mirrors a space left open for consideration and reconsideration, but also, as we will see, iconically imitates the lyric I’s creative mind at work, incapable of verbalising the ‘overwhelming question’ or grasping the feeling underlying it and thus, consequently, jumping from one thing to the next.

The speaker’s incapability of asking the overwhelming question is stressed by utilising the first Leerstelle. Similarly as a supplemented blank occurred after the first mentioning of the ‘overwhelming question’ in line 10, the Leerstelle between lines 68 and 69 can be read as an ‘upgrade’ of the same mechanism. In lines 67-68, the verses directly preceding the Leerstelle, Prufrock ponders “And should I then presume? / And how should I begin?”. Prufrock thus is concerned with how to frame the overwhelming question, an endeavour that is followed by an absence in the form of a Leerstelle. The Leerstelle on the one hand mirrors the emptiness of Prufrock’s mind at this point. His mind is a blank, he might be thinking about his own question during the Leerstelle, straining his brain to reach a result or a conclusion. At the same time, the reader is also given the opportunity to once more address his own and increasing anxiety with regards to the overwhelming question: what is it, and will Prufrock, after several stanzas, be able to verbalise it? This, alongside the fact that an open question increases the suspense and curiosity for an answer, clearly has the effect of urging the reader to read on. Once more, however, the answer is denied to both Prufrock and the reader alike, for after the Leerstelle the poem continues: “Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets / […]” (l. 70). This statement negates the Leerstelle in a way, as it clearly has not served its purpose for Prufrock. His ‘timeout’ for pondering was ineffectual as he returns, at another time and space, still pondering the same question of how to even begin. Moreover, the release of the tension heightened towards the Leerstelle is delayed as well: suspense, therefore, remains intact while, at the same time, frustration is increased which in turn helps to evoke, within the implied reader, the same linguistic anxiety Prufrock feels. The following stanza is one of the shortest of the poem and, without warning, leads to another Leerstelle in only a few verses. The problem is not yet solved, there needs to be another ‘timeout’, which, however, delays the conclusion even further and enhances both suspense and frustration alike. After the Leerstelle we have merely transitioned from one scene to the next, into a sleepy afternoon – the scene already described above. For the moment, the overwhelming question has stepped into the background, but will promptly return even more forcefully.
Prufrock in the following stanzas, beginning with line 70, ponders the overwhelming question with increasing desperation. What can he do? How can he pose it? Would it be worthwhile to overcome his anxiety and simply ask the question? Several hypothetical attempts are spelled out, one of which leads into the last, and perhaps most significant, Leerstelle of the poem. Directly before the Leerstelle, Prufrock ponders whether he should admit to his incapability of asking the question directly and thus, if incompletely, at least verbalising his feelings: “And turning toward the window, should say: / That is not it all, / That is not what I meant, at all.” (ll. 108-10). In contrast to the preceding Leerstellen, however, this last semantic blank is met with the sudden realisation that due to the fact that language itself is faulty, the verbalising attempt would be futile and never possibly mean what it is supposed to mean. “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;” (l. 111), Prufrock understands, and further states that he can “start a scene or two” (l. 113), but is incapable of completing them. Thus, inconsistent to the preceding Leerstelle where the answer to the overwhelming question was simply delayed, the possibility of ever verbalising the ‘overwhelming question’ here collapses entirely. This collapse leads to the realisation that what Prufrock before stressed, namely that there is still time, was wrong and that he is, indeed, growing old. Prufrock ponders his age for a few verses in a half-serious way: “I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach. / I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.” (ll. 123-24). Here the walking on the beach in white flannel trousers leads to a startling image of the mermaids singing, something that should be entirely impossible in the fragmented urban wasteland Prufrock lives in. The mermaid’s song, however, is clearly imbued with the same metapoetic qualities as the Abyssinian maid was in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”. In spite of the fact that Prufrock has given up all hope, hope for a conclusion is eventually presented to him in the form of the mermaid’s song (poetry or literature in general): the solution, it suddenly becomes clear, to the ‘overwhelming question’ and all its anxiety-instilling qualities, is simply to hear the mermaid’s song (to listen to the voice of inspiration), and in logical consequence to reduplicate it by verbalising this inspiration in literature. Unfortunately, however, even this moment of tentative hope is swiftly negated. “I do not think that they will sing to me.” (l. 125), Prufrock concludes, thus closing the option of ever alleviating himself of the overwhelming question, in turn abandoning the reader in the meaninglessness of the urban wasteland with only a glimpse of hope: “I have seen them [the mermaids] riding seaward on the waves / Combing the white hair of the waves blown back / When the wind blows the water white and black.” (ll. 126-28). This aesthetic affirmation
lingers and renders an artistic solution as an antidote to the emptiness of the world and its inhabitants as the only vaguely possible way out of the fragmented, urban wasteland.

The Leerstellen in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, therefore, are very different to the ones in “Kubla Khan”, even though in both poems Leerstellen are used to iconically render the workings of the poetic mind. Whereas in “Kubla Khan”, however, absences and Leerstellen are used to emphasise the richness and inexpressible greatness of what is underneath the lines, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” utilises the same tools in order to draw attention to the fact that the world has become empty and fragmented, that there is nothing left underneath that is waiting to erupt. Even the small spark of inspiration that is left is ineffective and cannot fill the omnipresent absence of meaning that is expressed by the poem. While both discussed poems utilise the same means of the Leerstelle to introduce a metapoetic theme as well as to iconically imitate the workings of inspiration and an inspired mind, they are nonetheless quite different in their effects. “Kubla Khan”, paradoxically by introducing absences into its enunciation, emphasises the underlying richness, while “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by the same means foregrounds and imitates absence and emptiness. Thus it becomes clear that a comparable use of semantic blanks can have rather different results, which once more stresses the fact that, indeed, absences can be signifying and meaningful in an overall interpretation of poetry or literature in general.

3.4. Leerstellen in Drama, Harold Pinter, The Birthday Party

Leerstellen can also occur in drama, which we will now turn to in order to show the presence of semantic absences in all three main genres of literature. The perhaps most tantalising Leerstelle in drama is the famous and frequently discussed blackout in Harold Pinter’s play The Birthday Party. This major Leerstelle is surrounded by a great number of minor semantic blanks, which are too numerous to be described in detail within the scope of this paper. Suffice to say at that point that, in general, The Birthday Party is a play that consistently utilises Leerstellen in order to enhance the suspense of the play by shutting out the audience from the events that might have taken place in the past, or are even taking place on stage at the very moment.
These numerous Leerstellen aside, the audience nonetheless is enabled to gain a clear picture of both the plot and setting of the play. *The Birthday Party* is set in a rural boarding house run by the elderly couple Petey and Meg, who have been boarding a man in his mid-thirties named Stanley for several years. During this time, Meg has begun to regard Stanley as ‘her Stanley’ in both a maternal as well as strangely sensual way. Stanley, however, seems to hold a secret that is never revealed – which is of course a Leerstelle in the play -- but which becomes highly problematic as two criminals, Goldberg and McCann, take their lodgings in the boarding house. During the eponymous birthday party set into motion by Meg, who deliberately ignores the fact that it is almost certainly not Stanley’s birthday, the sinister events that were foreshadowed during the earlier course of the play, unfold. These climaxing events are, however, not at all visible to the audience as a blackout takes place which plunges the stage into blackness. All the audience knows is that Stanley snaps and attempts to strangle Meg as well as to rape Lulu, a young, promiscuous girl in her twenties, and is then left with the shadows of Goldberg and McCann, who as is crystal clear have come to punish Stanley for whatever he did in the past, looming over him. What happens to Stanley in the following is never revealed – which is yet another Leerstelle in the text -- but it is obvious that the events taking place in the dark must be cruel enough to cause a complete breakdown in Stanley.

The blackout rather visibly in the performed play marks a clear Leerstelle which, of course, has several and important functions that contribute to the play as a whole. The most obvious functions are quickly explained: firstly, the blackout literally veils the events taking place on the stage, therefore leaving the audience in the dark about what is going on. This has clearly the effect of enhancing both the suspense and terror felt by the spectators. As we all know from watching horror movies, paired with the expectation of something negative, what terrifies us most is what we cannot see – it is the sense of dread of what might be hiding behind the next corner. It is the nature of our imaginations in such a scenario to paint the most horrifying picture possible for us: and the same is the case during the blackout. In addition, the darkness itself might contribute to the terrifying effect of the scene: a theatre pitched into darkness without warning and while the play is still being performed might be an unusual and chilling experience for the audience per se. The second obvious function of the Leerstelle is certainly the engagement of the spectator as a co-author of the play: as the events taking place cannot be seen but only guessed through perhaps a limited number of shadows flitting around, as well as sounds and dialogue, the audience is forced to make sense of the
events without depending on visuals or explanation. This, of course, enhances suspense as well, as of course we would like to know what is going on, not least to be able to better handle the growing sense of dread that might threaten to overcome us in the dark.

Both of these functions are certainly important and conform to the functions of a classical Leerstelle. The blackout, however, performs even more functions than these obvious ones and shall thus be examined more closely.

Firstly, it is important to note that the blackout does not simply happen ‘spontaneously’ for the described effects; rather, it is prepared in the course of the play. Similarly to what I have described in my discussion of Hardy’s Tess of the d’Urbervilles, where the reader is confronted with constantly thickening darkness, the blackness on the stage of The Birthday Party becomes gradually more complete. Unlike in Tess, however, the darkness in Pinter is also partly deliberate and not entirely out of control as it is subjected to higher forces (nature in Tess, the blackout in The Birthday Party). During the build-up to the eventual blackout, characters are deliberately switching on and off lights while outside, beyond their control, the natural darkness of the night increases.

The play with darkness occurs first in Act II at the beginning of the disastrous birthday party, when Meg is prompted to propose a toast. This toast is to be uttered, in Goldberg’s words, in “proper lighting” (p. 64). The following scene ensues:

“GOLDBERG: [...]McCann, have you got your torch?
MCCANN (bringing out a small torch from his pocket). Here.
GOLDBERG. Switch out the light and pout on your torch. (MCCANN goes to the door, switches off the light, comes back, shines the torch on MEG. Outside the window there is still a faint light.) Not on the lady, on the gentleman! You must shine it on the birthday boy. (MCCANN shines the torch in STANLEY’s face.) Now, Mrs Boles, it’s all yours.” (p. 64, bold mine).

What results from this is on the one hand a hint towards the natural lighting: outside, it is getting dark, but there is still a faint light, which leaves the room for the time being in an incomplete darkness. On the other hand, the lighting is also deliberately played with by the switching off of the light and the switching on of the torch. This ‘artificially’ created darkness has various effects. Firstly, the audience has the background knowledge that Goldberg and McCann have sinister plans for Stanley. Therefore, Goldberg’s request to turn off the lights
has the effect that the audience immediately suspects that something dreadful will happen. Although nothing bad happens to Stanley in this scene, the switching off of the light nonetheless foreshadows the events to come and inspires a certain sense of dread as well as inevitability within the audience. Secondly, the connotations of darkness are significant as well: malevolent events take place in darkness. The state of darkness per se might inspire primal fears within us. This, alongside the commonplace connotations of darkness (fear, anxiety, bad things lurking in the shadows, or plain evil) greatly enhances the suspense. Lastly, the use of the torchlight recalls the earlier interrogation scene: the light is directly shone at Stanley, which is common practice during interrogations. Therefore, the fact that the interrogation taking place earlier was not the last bad thing to happen to Stanley is emphasised, which again contributes to the overall sense of dread that is created in the scene and which will be gradually increased in the course of the play.

After the first toast, the situation relaxes a little bit. The light is switched back on, Lulu arrives, and the party guests start drinking. Soon, however, it is time to repeat the same game of plunging the stage into darkness, as Goldberg insists once again that the lights must be turned off while the drink to Stanley’s birthday:

“GOLDBERG: [congratulatory speech directed at Stanley] Turn out the light, McCann while we drink the toast. LULU: That was a wonderful speech. MCCANN switches out the light, comes back, and shines the torch in STANLEY’s face. The light outside the window is fainter.” (p. 66-67, bold mine)

Thus, the same game as in the previous event is played, with the difference that the natural lighting has grown fainter. Therefore, the overall darkness has become more intense, which enhances the portentous atmosphere. The audience expects something to happen every time the light goes out; in this way, the spectators become very aware of the visual absence pervading the stage, if only temporarily. Each time the light goes out and nothing happens, however, the suspense is slightly increased as the end-result seems inevitable.

It is, however, also obvious that tension cannot be built up endlessly. At some point, just like a strained rubber band, it must be released or is broken. This, of course, happens during the third and last evocation of darkness during the blackout. The blackout is, however, not only the climax in a series of light-darkness events, but also prepared by one more event: the
game of, significantly, blind man’s buff. During the game, the party guests are blindfolded and have to find any other contestant, who then in turn becomes the blind man. The party guests take turns, and soon it is Stanley’s turn to be the blind man. As he is blindfolded, his glasses are broken. Stanley thus becomes blind – or is plunged into darkness – before the blackout takes place. As opposed to the other party guests, however, he is not temporarily blindfolded: the destruction of his glasses will at the very least impair his eyesight for the rest of the play. This can be read as a foreshadowing not only of the blackout itself, but also of the more constant darkness that is circling over Stanley like a vulture: the darkness to take possession of him is not of a temporary kind; after the party, he will no longer be able to, figuratively, switch on the lights, neither his physical ones (the eyesight) nor his mental ones.

Directly before the blackout, Stanley is thus blindfolded and begins to walk across the room, while Goldberg breaks his glasses and places the drum, a birthday gift by Meg, in his path. Stanley falls over it and his foot gets stuck in the drum, but:

“STANLEY rises. He begins to move towards Meg, dragging the drum on his foot. He reaches her and stops. His hands move towards her and they reach her throat. He begins to strangle her. MCCANN and GOLDBERG rush forward and throw him off.

BLACKOUT

There is now no light at all through the window. The stage is in darkness.” (p. 73-74, bold mine)

In this way, the sudden and unexpected turn in Stanley’s actions – we are not at all aware of why he suddenly attacks Meg (which is yet another Leerstelle), and the discussion of his possible motif would lead us too far from the topic at hand – climaxes in the complete absence of everything: the blackout. Foreshadowed by the deliberate play with darkness in the preparing ‘blackout’ passages, this time control is taken from all characters. We do not know when and if the light will be back. Additionally, at the same time as the action of the play reaches its peak, the darkness reaches completeness as well: there is no light left outside at all. The stage is plunged into complete darkness, veiling the events from spectators and characters alike.

On stage, chaos ensues. The characters are exclaiming questions, are attempting to find whatever kind of orientation they can within the darkness. While a normal blackout would be
surprising and perhaps even startling, the circumstances of this blackout certainly lead to an entirely threatening scene: Stanley seems to have lost his mind and was last seen strangling Meg. Goldberg and McCann are brutal criminals out to get Stanley. Something is bound to happen in the darkness, but the audience is locked out from the events taking place on stage, which, of course, enhances the suspense significantly. Moreover, the characters of the play are also stuck in the now complete darkness and are terrified; the audience, in addition to the threat felt by the events taking place, can thus also sympathise and empathise with the characters on stage, which greatly contributes to the dread experienced. There is, however, a way to regain some light: McCann’s aforementioned torch. McCann, rationally, reaches for his torch as the lights go out, but it is knocked out of his hands in the tumult. He cannot find it again, and the stage is in complete darkness as we hear Stanley moving (his foot is still stuck in the drum), and Lulu whimpering – as McCann finally finds his torch, Lulu is “[...]lying spread-eagled on the table, STANLEY bent over her.” (p. 75). In the sparse light it becomes clear that Stanley has lost his mind – he is giggling as the light captures him and attempts to escape the light of the torch, as curiously the light has now a reverse function for him: while before the darkness was threatening, it is now the light, held by the two criminals, that means his doom. Thus, as he “[...]backs against the hatch, giggling,” the “[...]torch draws closer. His giggle rises and grows as he flattens himself against the wall. Their [Goldberg’s and McCann’s] figures converge upon him.” (p. 75-76). The curtain falls, mimicking the blackout in a final way and leaving the audience with a highly unsettling picture of the two criminals closing in on a helpless and insane Stanley.

Thus, the blackout provides an option to veil the events taking place on stage, which activates the imagination of the audience and enhances the sense of menace and suspense that has been gradually increased during the play. The final curtain of the act then finalises the semantic blank – in the same way as we only fragmentarily know what happens in the darkness, the curtain produces yet another Leerstelle: we never learn what exactly happens to Stanley, but can conclude that it is something terrible as he is a broken man after the events of the night.

While the functions of both the blackout as well as the final curtain of Act II have been sufficiently described above, there is one more function of the darkness that needs to be emphasised. As has also been observed by Rüdiger Imhof (1976: 242) the darkness also iconically mirrors Stanley’s mental descent, the ‘blacking out’ of his mental capacities. Imhof (1976: 242ff) also interprets Stanley’s glasses as a symbol of his individuality; the destruction
of the glasses signifies the loss of both his individuality and sanity, and plunges him into the animal-like, instinctual state that is thematised during the last interrogation passage. While Stanley is still in the possession of his glasses, he is also still in the possession of his own individuality, sanity, and his life. This is the reason why he clings to his glasses throughout act three, and constantly attempts to fix them. While the light, symbolic as well as literal, has returned for the other characters, Stanley is still captured within the darkness of the blackout. The absence present in the blackout has remained within him and manifests as an absence of ‘light’, sanity, individuality, liveliness, and climaxes in the fact that he is unable to move or even speak. We can therefore say that the semantic absence of the play is not merely a means of enhancing atmosphere, horror and suspense, but is also clearly reflected within Stanley himself.

In the same way as Stanley is left with an ‘absence’, Meg is too. She claims that she cannot remember the events of the night; she is therefore faced with an ‘absence’ of memory. This absence seems to be a voluntary one, however, as Meg continuously repeats how lovely the party had been and how she had been the belle of the ball. Her absence of memory might be a coping mechanism for a more painful absence she will be forced to face, namely the absence of Stanley, both physically as he is taken away by Goldberg and McCann, and mentally, as Stanley has had a nervous breakdown and is no longer Meg’s beloved Stanley.

The stylistic absences in this way are closely connected to a series of other, thematic absences. It can be said that the darkness has crept into the characters and removed something in them. The Leerstellen are thus mirrored within the absences of the play itself, and therefore become more encompassing than being a merely stylistic means of audience activation and enhancement of suspense. These absences within the characters themselves can also be read as a symbol of ‘decentred’ human being who is fragmented and incomplete in a similar way as Prufrock is in Eliot’s poem. In summary, it has therefore become evident that semantic blanks contribute greatly to the overall effect of Pinter’s play, and that what is absent within the play plays an equally important role as does what is effectively present both on stage as well as within the characters.
4. Aural Blanks

So far I have only been concerned with Leerstellen, or semantic blanks. It is now high time to focus on another kind of formal absences, namely aural blanks. It is intuitively clear that aural blanks lend themselves more willingly to performed drama and poetry. It can be argued that, particularly in the case of hypocatalectic verses, the aural blank is also a visual blank. This of course holds true, but ignores the fact that drama is meant to be experienced in a performance and not read. Poetry, on the other hand, is also highly performative and closely linked to musicality. Meter, rhyme and prosodic melody are altogether aural phenomena. For these reasons, I have chosen to subsume the following examples under aural blanks rather than visual blanks, although of course many if not all of the discussed blanks are also visually visible if the respective text is read instead of performed. In drama, aural blanks can include both an irregularity in meter or prolonged and noticeable pauses in dialogue. In poetry, any deviation from an otherwise regular meter will be swiftly noted by any audience. Both drama and poetry have a higher tendency to be performed, or, in the case of poetry, even if not read aloud there is a distinct sense of musicality that will foreground any absences. My discussion will therefore be focussed on examples from drama and poetry (and pre-suppose that both are ‘performed’ in order to make the aural blanks apply, indeed, to the auditory faculty). It can be argued that, particularly in the case of hypocatalectic verses, the aural blank is also a visual blank. This of course holds true, but ignores the fact that drama is meant to be experienced in a performance and not read. Poetry, on the other hand, is also highly performative and closely linked to musicality. Meter, rhyme and prosodic melody are altogether aural phenomena. For these reasons, I have chosen to subsume the following examples under aural blanks rather than visual blanks, although of course many if not all of the discussed blanks are also visually noticeable if the respective text is read instead of performed.

For similar reasons, I excluded prose from the discussion of aural blanks. Prose, if read aloud, can, of course, include aural blanks. Prose is, however, usually meant to be read rather than performed. Additionally, aural blanks in prose would usually occur in dialogue (internal or external), thus rendering the nature of the aural blank similar to the one found in drama. I have, therefore, decided against the use of separate examples from prose. Additionally, it shall be noted at this point that aural blanks in accordance with Wolf (2005) can be divided into supplemented and non-supplemented types. Supplements in drama could include
gestures or signs, supplements in poetry would be more unusual. As the supplementation with gestures, however, does not strike me as particularly different to the general use of aural blanks, I have decided against a separate discussion of supplemented and non-supplemented aural blanks.

Aural blanks -- supplemented or not -- are rather frequent in both drama and poetry alike. In the following I will attempt to emphasise the importance of the general contribution of aural blanks to the work as a whole in various examples, starting with two of Shakespeare’s greatest tragedies, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*.

### 4.1. Aural Blanks in Shakespeare, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*

Shakespeare’s authorial genius is universally acknowledged, and there is hardly a writer who has been as extensively researched as he. I firmly believe that at least part of Shakespeare’s genius stems from the fact that the writer was able to exploit most fully the array of themes in his plays and poems. Little to nothing is left to circumstance and the closer a Shakespeare text is read, the more connections can be found. This said, it is unlikely to find in Shakespeare accidental lapses or incomplete, thoughtless passages. This artistic thoroughness is, however, not limited to what is present on the pages. On the contrary, many instances where absence is used to emphasise a point can be found in the various Shakespeare plays, some of which are already aptly pointed out in Wolf (2005: 119-20). As Nänny has already aptly observed (2000: 176ff.) long and short verse lines in drama can become iconic and therefore emphasise meaning on the level of discourse. Short lines, or hypocatalectic verses, in accordance with Nänny can and do function as an icon of “smallness contraction, slimness and narrowness” (Nänny 2000: 176), but also as icons of “loss, vacuity and singularity” (Nänny 2000: 179). These significance of short lines in drama as described by Nänny can definitely be found in Shakespeare’s plays: Strongly felt absences, for instance death or the utter meaninglessness of life, are usually expressed by hypocatalectic verses woven into an otherwise flawless, regular meter. The evidence that these hypocatalectic verses in these instances are not arbitrarily coinciding with the content of the respective speech is too dense to be neglected. Too regularly is the verse deliberately shortened in order to more fully express absence of any kind.
Although many examples could be quoted with regards to aural blanks as signifying absences in Shakespeare, let us focus on only few illustrating ones, starting with two examples from Macbeth. One of the earliest thematisations of absence in Macbeth takes place in act I, scene vii. On the level of story, King Duncan has arrived at Macbeth’s castle, and Macbeth himself and overzealous Lady Macbeth have already taken to plotting against the king. Macbeth, however, has second thoughts concerning murdering the king as he has realised that Duncan is a good king, and that the only reason to kill him would indeed be Macbeth’s own ambition. In the scene, a dialogue between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth ensues, in which Macbeth voices his doubts and Lady Macbeth calls him a coward:

Lady Macbeth:
[...]Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem’st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting ‘I dare not’ wait upon ‘I would,’
Like the poor cat i’th’adage?
Macbeth:

Prithee, peace:
I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.
(I.vii.39-47)

During this dialogue the aforementioned absence takes place: Lady Macbeth asks her husband if he no longer craves the crown, and if he would not rather seize it than “Letting ‘I dare not’ wait upon ‘I would’” (I.vii.44). Macbeth defends himself in the following way: “I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none.” (I.vii.47-48). Even though Lady Macbeth takes the next turn and completes the hypocatalectic verse, there is nonetheless a clear aural pause (if not, stylistically, a complete blank) at the end of Macbeth’s reply. The pause here signifies the absence of masculinity: he who is overambitious and dares do more than is morally good, is no man – and this absence of manliness is reflected by the incomplete verse.

Whereas it might at first appear unnecessary to foreground the absence of masculinity in such a way, it is important to note that questions of masculinity and femininity play an important role in Macbeth. Firstly, Lady Macbeth decides to cast away her femininity in order to fulfil the bloody, ‘manly’ deed that is necessary to further her husband’s political ascend. Secondly, the question of masculinity is raised in two different ways. Lady Macbeth
accuses her husband of not being a man as he has second thoughts about murdering the king, while Macbeth takes a more moral stance and replies that a man is only a man if he is morally firm and does not do more than becomes him. Therefore, a rather central conflict is highlighted and emphasised by an incomplete aural blank, which iconically mirrors the absence of manliness that is discussed within the dialogue on the level of discourse.

The incompleteness of this incomplete aural blank may be attributed to the fact that it highlights a concern that is central to the play, but which is not as tragic as other absences. The absence of life, in particular, is a topic in Macbeth that exhibits aural blanks. It is, for instance, iconically expressed by the use of a hypocatalectic verse in V.v. in Macbeth’s famous speech held after Macbeth was informed of his wife’s suicide. Lady Macbeth’s death is to be read as the first absence: one, the absence of life, and two, the absence of herself. Both absences hit Macbeth hard, and he muses about the nature of time and life, until his speech finally climaxes in the famous lines:

Life’s but a walking shadow; a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing. (V.v.23-27)

The absence of life thus prompts Macbeth into a reflection of life, which ultimately contains and means absolutely nothing. This desperation at life is most fully expressed not only by the choice of metareferential imagery, but also by the use of a hypocatalectic verse. His speech – becoming increasingly chaotic due to a ‘dissolving’ meter utilising enjambments -- ends iconically and aptly in nothingness: the verse cannot be completed, as there is nothing left to say. This, of course, foregrounds the nothingness and meaninglessness that is felt by Macbeth and which, at least according to him, is the essence of life. This nothingness and despair that is also signified by the aural blank is part of Macbeth’s punishment of his crime. Whereas he wanted to seize an ‘everything’ he is now left with nothing, a despairing absence which is foregrounded by the use of the hypocatalectic verse. Additionally, the necessary pause following the aural blank might give the audience a moment to consider the words spoken by Macbeth, which gives them additional weight by framing them with silence.
The same game with nothingness is played in *King Lear* in act I, scene i. After Goneril’s and Regan’s pompous (and fake) expressions of their love for their father, King Lear demands of Cordelia to mimic them in their praise:

KING LEAR.
[...]what can you say to draw
A third [speech] more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
CORDELIA.
Nothing, my lord.
KING LEAR.
Nothing!
CORDELIA.
Nothing.
KING LEAR.
Nothing will come of nothing: speak again.
(I.i.87-92)

The emptiness of the verse here of course imitates the emptiness of Cordelia’s speech, at least as far as words or fake ornaments are concerned. It is foregrounded even further by the repetition of both the word ‘nothing’, one as an exclamation by King Lear and a second time by a statement uttered by Cordelia, as well as a repetition of incomplete verses. Indeed, this emphasis on nothingness can hardly be described as properly metered verses at all. This emphasis on both thematic as well as formal absence has the effect that a central ‘nothingness’ that will determine the rest of the play is strongly foregrounded. The nothingness expressed is, however, twofold: firstly, King Lear wrongly interprets the absence of a glorifying speech as an absence of love, which in turn results in Cordelia’s exile. The true reason for the absence is, however, the fact that Cordelia does not wish to fake her love by wrapping it in flowery and artificial ornaments. Her love is true, and thus it is simple and devoid of any artificiality. She loves best for she does so without adulteration. This means that true love, or truly heartfelt, deep emotion can only be expressed by ‘nothing’, or simplicity of speech lacking all sorts of artistry. This notion is also reflected on the level of discourse: in the same way as it is stated that true emotion is not in need of any ornaments, the passage itself is void of any artistry and contains simple, straight-forward and incomplete verses without meter or any sort or artistic flattery. This straightforwardness of the passage also illustrates the fact that deep emotion such as truly felt love cannot be described with words: true love and affection cannot be part of an artistic or artificial creation, which in the passage results in Cordelia’s ‘speechlessness’ which is rendered tangible by the use of aural blanks on the level of discourse.
It can thus be said that Shakespeare rather frequently utilises absences in the form of aural blanks in order to iconically strengthen the content of a passage. Additionally, the aural blanks highlight and frame important passages as the absence of speech (sound, in the widest sense) foregrounds the most important events or messages by acoustically isolating them from the rest of the play. Aural blanks, therefore, serve important purposes in the two examples provided above, and can definitely be said to be great contributors to these plays as a whole.

4.2. Aural Blanks in Pinter, *The Birthday Party*

Aural blanks in drama do not necessarily require a regular metre that can be interrupted by the use of hypocatalectic verses to signify absences. They can also serve important functions in the form of pauses or silences, as is for instance the case in Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*, but also a frequent means of sense-making in Beckett’s plays as shall be discussed in the following. For now, however, let us revisit Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* and focus on aural blanks, instances of absences that have been ignored so far in the discussion of the play.

Indeed, Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* utilises an extraordinary amount of pauses and silences. These pauses contribute to the overall effect of the play in different ways and serve several important functions. In general, I believe Imhof’s (cf. Imhof 1976: 182ff.) observation that pauses in Pinter’s plays usually help to characterise persons that would otherwise not be characterised to be true. Pinter indeed uses pauses in form of silences speaking loud and clear in order to create information by what is absent rather than by what is present.

The first of these characterisations by absence takes place already at the beginning of the play. Here the audience witnesses a rather meaningless, small-talk like conversation between Petey and Meg that is riddled by an extraordinarily large amount of pauses. In fact, the play already begins with a number of pauses:

MEG. Is that you, Petey?

*Pause.*

Petey, is that you?

*Pause.*
Of course it would be possible to attribute the presence of the pauses to Petey simply being absent-minded, but this would already characterise Petey in a way, as he would be shown to be inattentive towards his wife. The same ‘inattentiveness’, however, becomes a prominent feature of the couple’s conversation, and thus clearly hints towards the estrangement as well as absence of true communication between the married couple. This will become more obvious throughout the rest of the scene, where Petey remains silent unless prompted by Meg, who takes an effort to keep the conversation alive. The conversation between the estranged couple, however, is by no means lively. Despite Meg’s best efforts, it fizzes into nothingness almost as swiftly as it has begun. Meg’s struggle to maintain a dialogue with her husband is also signified by the fact that Meg repeats topics (she asks about the contents of the newspaper Petey is reading twice, comments on the food or asks about Stanley), and switches from one topic to the next as soon as the budding conversation has gotten stuck once more. The contents of the dialogue are absolutely insignificant; the little information that is contained within what is actually said aloud could be solved by a single line or an entrance of Stanley. As we might safely assume that Pinter did not add the scene merely to fill some more time, the true information about the scene must be transmitted in between the lines, namely in the pauses and the things that are not said. Thus, the scene characterises both Petey and Meg in a thorough manner, simply by using the ubiquitous pauses in order to foreground their estrangement, and the impossibility of genuine dialogue or conversation between them.

A similar stop-and-go dialogue takes place between Petey and Meg at the end of the play. At first it is once again Meg who attempts to keep the conversation flowing, but something in Petey, who has witnessed the gruesome aftermath of the birthday party, has changed. Whereas in the first scene Petey answered comprehensively and adequately, the last scene finds him at a loss for words, incapable or unwilling to discuss any of the events of the party, which can be, for instance, seen in the following passage:

MEG. Where’s Stan?

Pause.

Is Stan down yet, Petey?
PETEY. No...he’s...
MEG. Is he still in bed?
PETEY. Yes, he’s...still asleep
MEG. Still? He’ll be late for his breakfast.
PETEY. Let him...sleep.

Pause. (p. 96-97)

In this passage the pauses have various effects. Firstly, we realise that Meg, despite her cheerful outside demeanour might be slightly anxious. The pause between her question of where Stanley is and Petey’s reply is not entirely played out in the same way as was the case in the very first scene of the play, as Meg does not patiently wait for Petey’s reply. Rather, unsettled by the subconscious knowledge that something is wrong with Stanley, she swiftly fills the silence with another, extremely similar question. Her impatience is met by Petey in a hesitant manner: the dots between the fragments of his sentences certainly result in hesitant, halting speech in a performed play, thus leaving clearly marked aural blanks behind. In a way, the pauses of the general discourse of the two have spilled over into Petey’s own speech. It is significant, however, that by the use of these extra aural blanks in Petey’s speech, he is characterised once more: for one, the audience learns that Petey has been deeply unsettled by the events of the past night, which on the one hand marks Petey as a reasonably empathetic and likeable person, but at the same time also, besides the characterisation effect, once more highlights the feeling of dread felt by the audience regarding the events of the birthday party. Secondly, we learn something else about Petey, namely that he truly wants to protect his wife, who obviously cannot or does not want to remember the ongoings of the last night. This is why Stanley is struggling for the right words; he does not wish to disclose to Meg that Stanley had a nervous breakdown, that something has gone completely awry during the birthday party. Therefore, he struggles for words, considers very carefully what to say and what to be silent about. While these pauses and hesitancies seem to pass by unbeknownst to Meg, the audience surely realises their presence. In this way, the blanks in Petey’s speech also serve to foreground the unspeakable which has taken place in the rural boarding house. The pause before Petey states that Stanley is “...asleep” or should be left to “...sleep” signify that he has to search for a word, a euphemism, for what is truly wrong with Stanley. Petey knows that he cannot help Stanley in any way after his attempt to convince Goldberg to leave Stanley behind in his and Meg’s care has failed. In this way, the hesitance also stands witness to Petey’s sense of defeat as he is confronted with a situation he cannot change, but which is nonetheless unspeakably cruel.
The fact that what has taken place is indeed unspeakable, that it can by no words or actions be described, is already inherently present in the fact that the actual events are veiled from the audience’s view by the blackout. The blackout is now carried over into Petey’s and Meg’s speech, therefore truly rendering the gruesome events ‘unspeakable’.

Indeed, the events must have been so bad for Meg as to make her want to erase them from her memory, which she effectively does. This becomes obvious at the very ending of the play, where Meg struggles with suppressing her emotions and memory. Significantly, once more a pause is used to illustrate this struggle:

Meg. I was the belle of the ball.
Petey. Were you?
Meg. Oh yes. They all said I was.
Petey. I bet you were, too.
Meg. Oh, it’s true. I was.
Pause.
I know I was.
Curtain. (p. 97)

Meg, at the very least subconsciously, is aware of the fact that the birthday party was a disaster that cost Stanley’s sanity. Nonetheless, she attempts to cling to a positive (and exaggerated) memory of herself as the belle of the ball. In the conversation with Petey, she repeats the fact thrice, climaxing it with marking it as a irrefutable statement by claiming it is undeniably true. What follows is a pause which is telling, as Meg, after the pause, has to state the same thing again. “I know I was.” (p. 97) are her last words, as well as the last words of the play. These words are, of course, not uttered because Meg feels the need to state the obvious once, twice, thrice – they are significant to her because she needs to keep chanting them in order to convince herself of their truth value. In this way, just like Petey’s pauses in his speech before, her silence not only veils the unspeakable (and by that also renders it as the unspeakable in the first place), but also builds a for the audience tangible hedge of protection against the evils of the last night.

Not only Petey and Meg are attributed signifying and telling pauses, however. Stanley also remains curiously silent on many occasions, albeit his pauses characterise him differently. In Stanley’s case, his pauses signify his debilitating fear, his incapability of stopping the inevitable. He remains motionless and silent instead of taking flight or shouting
for help. It is indeed Stanley’s pauses that at first hint towards the fact that Goldberg and McCann are no good news, albeit they present themselves politely and jovially:

MEG. Goldberg. [finally remembering the name of their house guest]
STANLEY. Goldberg?
MEG. That’s right. That was one of them.
STANLEY *slowly sits at the table, left.*
Do you know them?
STANLEY *does not answer.*
Stan, they won’t wake you up, I promise. I’ll tell them they must be quiet.
STANLEY *sits still.*
You mustn’t be sad today. It’s your birthday.
*A pause.* (p. 45)

In this passage the audience gains their first insight into the hopelessness of Stanley’s situation. At the same time, it becomes painfully clear that something is amiss with Goldberg and McCann. As Meg prattles on, unaware of why Stanley is not answering, the audience understands that Stanley must know Goldberg, and that his presence at the boarding house clearly affects him negatively. Furthermore, the audience learns about Stanley’s incapability of shouting out or fleeing, his acceptance of his end upon the arrival of Goldberg and McCann. Stanley’s silences are later reproduced in his confrontations with Goldberg and McCann on various occasions, for example the interrogation scenes where the two criminals take turns and Stanley remains silent.

The passivity of Stanley in the things happening to him is thus foreshadowed already very early on in the play. Stanley’s pauses, however, grow towards the end of the play and climax in his total loss and resulting absence of speech. By the end of the play, all that is left of Stanley is silence, a motionless heap that feebly and helplessly attempts to reclaim himself.

Stanley’s pauses therefore serve to characterise himself as a rather helpless, passive victim at the hands of Goldberg and McCann, but also enable the audience, by forcing it to read in between the lines, to draw conclusions about the two criminals very early on in the play.

Lastly, pauses in Goldberg’s speech are utilised in order to characterise the villain:

GOLDBERG. [...]And you’ll find—that what I say is true.
Because I believe that the world . . . (*Vacant.*) . . .
Because I believe that the world . . . (*Desperate*) . . .
BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT THE WORLD . . . (*Lost.*) . . .
This passage follows a longish speech of Goldberg where he states that all his life he has simply done what was expected of him, and followed the rules lined out for him. The audience then finds him at a total loss of words, however. On the one hand, Goldberg seems to be convinced of the truth-value of his speech, but as he reaches the ‘because’ part, he finds himself incapable of actually finding any justification or value in what he has just uttered. Instead of reaching a conclusion, he simply keeps repeating the ‘because’ phrase, at first with increasing desperation to, at last, find himself entirely at a loss. Therefore, he does not finish the phrase, but rather sits down and changes the topic. We learn that Goldberg, the supervillain of the play, is actually lost and living in a world that is desperately empty and void of any meaning. While this does not greatly contribute to a different construction of sympathies, the pauses in Goldberg’s speech nonetheless allow for a slightly more human characterisation of Goldberg. It is neither his actions nor his words that mark Goldberg as a human being. Rather, it is his silence, the loss of words, the aural blanks that attribute at least some emotion to him.

It has thus been comprehensively seen that Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* would not function in the way it does without the extensive use of absences. The use of semantic blanks that has been discussed in a previous chapter, as well as the use of absences and pauses for mostly purposes of characterisation outlined in this chapter clearly emphasise that silence in *The Birthday Party* is both telling and speaking. Aural blanks therefore greatly contribute to the overall meaning and sense-making of the play, and should thus be taken into account during a thorough analysis of the play.

4.3. Aural Blanks in Beckett

The general emphasis on the meaninglessness of the world as well as the nothingness of being in Beckett’s work already suggests that a absence in various forms might be central to Beckett’s oeuvre. Beckett’s plays are indeed signified by deep feelings of loss and the oppressiveness of spiritual, linguistic and even physical (nothing exists in the world anymore) absences. This predominance of absences on the thematic level renders a utilisation of stylistic forms of absences highly probable. Indeed, aural blanks are used frequently in
Beckett’s plays in order to reflect the absences expressed on the story level, but also in order to emphasise the emptiness that is so central to Beckett’s absurdist worlds. Various forms and functions of absences can be found and described throughout the entirety of Beckett’s work. As the central topic of this thesis is not, however, a thorough analysis of Beckett’s work, I have opted to illustrate the central forms and functions of absence in only the perhaps two most famous plays written by Beckett: Waiting for Godot and Endgame.

4.3.1. Aural Blanks in Waiting for Godot

Before we can shift our focus on a more detailed discussion of aural blanks in Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, it is at first essential to point out a major Leerstelle framing the text as a whole. The Leerstelle centres around the absence of Godot: neither do we ever learn who Godot is, nor why he never comes, or even why Estragon and Vladimir keep waiting for him – or for what reason they are awaiting Godot’s arrival in the first place. Therefore, Godot becomes a non-present entity whose absence looms large in the play. Reading Godot as a real person would perhaps overstrain the semantic absences. Godot, however, is not to be read as an actual character but rather as a (spiritual) saviour figure that never appears. If Godot, and all that he implies, would appear, Vladimir and Estragon would be free from their pointless and infinite waiting. Godot, however, never arrives, and Vladimir and Estragon therefore remain stuck in the immobility along with their ponderings that never seem to yield any results. In this way the Leerstelle, the deliberate omission of setting up Godot as a ‘real’ character, enables the audience to view Godot much more as an allegory than an actual person. Thus the Leerstelle helps to move Godot from an expected character to a more abstract and metaphoric, spiritual – perhaps even metaphysical -- entity.

The expected spiritual answer/salvation as represented by Godot looms large in the play in general. Indeed, Vladimir and Estragon appear to be on a spiritual quest, attempting to find something spiritually satisfying. This search for spirituality and, consequentially the absence thereof, is clearly represented in the dialogues of the protagonists, particularly in the manifold aural blanks. Whereas in Endgame, as will be seen in my discussion of the play, pauses and aural blanks are frequently employed in order to highlight a general and encompassing nothingness, aural blanks in Waiting for Godot are often signifying a spiritual absence as well as the attempt to fill in the spiritual blank. Therefore, the aural blanks are rendered differently in Waiting for Godot as they are in Endgame. Where in Endgame a pause is usually simply a
pause signifying nothingness, pauses in *Waiting for Godot* are frequently placeholders for ponderings:

ESTRAGON: *(giving up again).* Nothing to be done.
VLADIMIR: *(advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart).* I’m beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I’ve tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven’t yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. *(He broods, musing on the struggle. Turning to Estragon).* So there you are again.
ESTRAGON: Am I?
VLADIMIR: I’m glad to see you back. I thought you were gone for ever.
ESTRAGON: Me too.
VLADIMIR: Together again at last! We’ll have to celebrate this. But how? *(He reflects.)* Get up till I embrace you. (p. 7, bold mine).

This passage, taken from the very beginning of the play, not only emphasises the emptiness and senselessness that is to be expected from a Beckett play by beginning with the fact that there is “Nothing to be done” (p. 7), it also clearly introduces the theme of (spiritual) ponderings, mainly undertaken by Vladimir, and their deliberate co-occurrence with aural blanks. These blanks, unlike we have seen in Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*, are not spelled out as pauses. The ‘thinking breaks’, however, manifest as aural blanks no less. Thus, Vladimir broods and muses on the struggle, and later reflects on how to celebrate his and Estragon’s re-union properly. While these ‘thinking’ passages may or may not be accompanied by gestures depending on the performance, a realisation of ‘brooding’, ‘musing’ or ‘reflecting’ without an actual silence, an aural blank, is highly unlikely. We can thus safely assume that these thinking gaps, even though not spelled out as silences or pauses, are actually realised as aural blanks and thus also function as such. The application of aural blanks in this passage does not only render the thinking process more tangible – Vladimir is considering an antidote against the ‘nothing to be done’ which is, of course, a profound philosophical question and therefore requires thoughtful consideration, which is rendered obvious by the resulting aural blank – but also points towards the impossibility of actually following the considerations with clear answers. Indeed, the thinking breaks are not followed by revelations of any kind. On the contrary, the blanks remain and are followed by something not truly connected to what has been considered during the blank. In the first instance, Vladimir ponders on the struggle of filling the world with meaning, but at a loss for an answer he turns towards Estragon, establishing that he is here again, pointing towards the repetitiveness of their meetings. The continuous waiting and returning to the same place in order to resume the waiting once more
is, of course, negative for both protagonists and pitches them into desperation on multiple occasions throughout the play. Thus, the silence after a question how to celebrate their reunion – for what is there to celebrate in the futile repetition of the waiting game – can only be followed by an unanswered blank for the question is truly unanswerable. Thus, the silence ensuing during ponderings not only renders the thinking process more tangible, but also emphasises the spiritual emptiness of the considerations, or maybe more accurately, the impossibility of filling the blanks with something spiritually profound. This can also be seen clearly in the following passage:

VLADIMIR: merely smile. (He smiles suddenly from ear to ear, keeps smiling, ceases as suddenly.) It’s not the same thing. Nothing to be done. (Pause.) Gogo.
ESTRAGON: (irritably). What is it?
VLADIMIR: Did you ever read the Bible?
ESTRAGON: The Bible . . . (He reflects.) I must have taken a look at it. (p. 8)

Here the mentioning of the Bible, certainly one of the major manifestations of spiritual sense-making, is followed by an aural blank. Here the aural blanks, just like before, do not only illustrate Estragon’s thinking process and attempt to remember whether or not he has ever read the Bible, but also illustrate the emptiness of such an endeavour. Even if Estragon had read the Bible, it would have been a futile thing to do, as the Bible, just like Estragon’s considerations per se, is void of any valid spiritual answer the two of them. This is expressed by the omission markers and the following reflection by Estragon. This becomes even more clear as Estragon picks up and answers the question with “I must have taken a look” (p. 8): indeed, he might have taken a look, but this glance at the Bible is inconsequential and could as well have been a look at some other book. Even if the look into the Bible were not without spiritual value, the value has been forgotten by Estragon already. Thus, the aural blanks in this passage not only illustrate the reflection, but also render the absence of any spiritual content both within the Bible and Estragon’s own mind, more tangible.

While these ‘pondering’ aural blanks at the beginning of the play still conjure truly profound questions, this profundity is increasingly led ad absurdum in the course of the play. This manifests itself usually in a way that renders the questions themselves absurd and empty. While on page 10, at the relative beginning of the play, Vladimir ponders “All the same . . . that tree . . . (turning towards the auditorium) that bog . . .” -- at least pointing towards something potentially symbolic and profound (the tree as a symbol of life, for instance), the ponderings take a far less profound turn after Pozzo’s (first) arrival:
ESTRAGON: (timidly, to Pozzo). You’re not Mr. Godot, Sir?
POZZO: (terrifying voice). I am Pozzo! (Silence.) Pozzo! (Silence.) Does that name mean nothing to you? (Silence.) I say does that name mean nothing to you?

Vladimir and Estragon look at each other questioningly.

ESTRAGON: (pretending to search). Bozzo . . . Bozzo . . .
VLADIMIR: (ditto). Pozzo . . . Pozzo . . .
POZZO: PPPOZZZO!
ESTRAGON: Ah! Pozzo . . . let me see . . . Pozzo . . .
VLADIMIR: Is it Pozzo or Bozzo? (p. 15)

In this passage, the insignificance of Pozzo being Pozzo is already introduced semantically by the fact that he is not Godot, and thus not the saviour figure Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for. Thus it is unsurprising that the name Pozzo means nothing to either of the main protagonists. This is stressed by the application of aural blanks in Pozzo’s speech. He repeats his name, in a terrifying manner, which is always followed by a silence. This silence on the one hand is a silence that cannot be filled by either of the discourse partners, for there is nothing that can possibly fill the blank. Moreover, the silence signifies the utter meaningless and insignificance of Pozzo. This insignificance is what Pozzo is fighting against, which is why he adopts a terrifying posture, hoping to intimidate Estragon and Vladimir into ‘recognising’ him, thus attributing meaning to his person and identity. The fact that Pozzo, at least in the form of potential spiritual salvation or sense-making, is utterly insignificant, however, also renders Estragon’s and Vladimir’s ponderings entirely pointless and slightly comical. Where before the aural blanks in ‘pondering situations’ were still concerned with something profound, they are now applied to something completely insignificant and partly ridiculous, namely the person of Pozzo and the exact spelling of his name.

This first devaluation of the main protagonists’ ponderings finally climaxes in the scene where Lucky is asked to think for their entertainment:

POZZO: Stand back! (Vladimir and Estragon move away from Lucky. Pozzo jerks the rope. Lucky looks at Pozzo.) Think, pig! (Pause. Lucky begins to dance.) Stop! (Lucky stops.) Forward! (Lucky advances.) Stop! (Lucky stops.) Think! (Silence.

LUCKY: On the other hand with regard to –
POZZO: Stop! (Lucky stops.) Back! (Lucky moves back.) Stop! (Lucky stops.) Turn! (Lucky turns towards auditorium.) Think! (p. 28).
Firstly, Lucky’s thinking process is halted not only by Lucky’s own apparent incomprehension (after the first pause he begins to dance rather than ‘think’), but also by Pozzo’s various commands asking Lucky repeatedly to stop and turn. When finally the ‘Think!’ command is issued, a silence ensues. This aural blank signifies the delay in both Lucky’s comprehension of the command as well as the ‘thinking’ that only comes hesitantly. Being asked to think for the amusement of others is, of course, no easy task, particularly as such ‘thinking’ must necessarily be verbalised. The thoughts Lucky eventually issues are nonsensical at best, and instead of uttering profound thoughts he launches into a tirade of nonsense. His speech is longish and filled with repetitions and meaningless filling words such as “quaquaquaqua” or “Acacacacademy of Anthropopopometry” (p. 28). Furthermore, the tirade is curiously without any pauses, indeed the printed edition does not even feature any punctuation marks which, as one can easily imagine, would result in a rather rapid, monotonous speech in the performance. Lucky’s thinking is thus entirely unsubstantial, more a play with words and sounds than containing any real meaning. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the other characters on stage move from attentiveness to protest, while Pozzo is increasingly suffering as listening to Lucky’s ‘thinking’. After Lucky has rambled on for a while the other characters decide that they need to make him stop and thus seize his hat (without which Lucky cannot think and which has been given to him before):

LUCKY: [......] tennis . . . the stones . . . so calm . . . Cunard . . . unfinished . . .
POZZO: His hat! 
Vladimir seizes Lucky’s hat. Silence of Lucky. He falls. Silence. Panting of the victors. (p. 29, bold mine)

The end of Lucky’s tirade is signified by a number of aural blanks. These blanks on the one hand slow down his speech significantly giving a sense of exhaustion on Lucky’s side, and on the other hand recall and subtly mock Vladimir’s earlier, similar if significantly more profound ponderings (e.g. the ponderings about the tree and life). It remains ambivalent whether the other characters on stage are simply tired of Lucky’s tirade or unsettled by the meaninglessness of his discourse. In any way, they decide to stop him and seize his ‘thinking cap’. The silence to follow is like somebody has pulled Lucky’s plug, and indeed Lucky is more machine or animal than thinking human being, fuelled alone by Pozzo’s commands and otherwise mute. Lucky falls, and once more silence follows, a silence that is perhaps for a change a relief not only for the characters on stage but also for the audience, for listening to Lucky’s nonsense is taxing indeed. The silence, however, is incomplete as the ‘victors’ are
panting. Describing Estragon, Vladimir and Pozzo as victors because they have managed to successfully end Lucky’s discourse points towards another absence, namely the absence of any motion or willingness for change. If, for too long, somebody ponders, something might change – be it a real change in that an answer is found, or an admittance of defeat and of the futility of beginning to think in the first place (which, effectively, would end all discourse). Change of any kind, however, is not truly desirable for Estragon and Vladimir, even though they suffer under the circumstances of endless waiting and never finding. On multiple occasions they stress how it is safer to simply not do anything (like, for instance, hang themselves) or truly question anything.

This absence of willingness to change is perhaps most prominently expressed in the absence of movement or motion, the total lack of action taken throughout the play. Estragon and Vladimir are passively waiting, attempting at best to pass the time, but never truly thinking of a means to escape their situation for good. This is reflected in the immobility of the main protagonists at the end of the respective acts, where they agree to leave and yet remain motionless until the curtain falls, as well as the prospect that the two of them will return the next day to resume their infinite waiting for Godot. The immobility on the level of action is, however, also clearly manifested in dialogue and often underlined by the use of aural blanks, as can be seen in the following passage where Pozzo and Lucky are leaving in act I:

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ESTRAGON: Then adieu.
POZZO: Adieu.
VLADIMIR: Adieu.
Silence. No one moves.
VLADIMIR: Adieu.
ESTRAGON: Adieu.
Silence.
POZZO: And thank you.
VLADIMIR: Thank you.
POZZO: Not at all.
ESTRAGON: Yes yes.
POZZO: No no.
VLADIMIR: Yes yes.
ESTRAGON: No no.
Silence.
POZZO: I don’t seem to be able . . . (long hesitation) . . . to depart.
ESTRAGON: Such is life.” (p. 31)
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Here the action, namely Pozzo and Lucky’s leave, is delayed significantly by repeated silences. The silences, however, do not in any way interrupt a meaningful discourse, but rather the repetitions of the same parting phrases. The silences, in this way, render the immobility of the characters, their unwillingness to take action, more tangible by repeating them on the aural level. The fact of the incapability or unwillingness to take action (in this case, leave) is eventually acknowledged by Pozzo. His statement that he is not able to leave is once more interrupted by a signifying aural blank: his long hesitation before “...to depart” iconically mirrors the hesitation he feels on the aural level. Estragon’s simple statement that “Such is life.” (p. 31) then explains the reason for the immobility: life, in the world view of the play, is a static, infinite waiting game where nothing ever takes real action, nor anything ever truly evolves or changes.

While it cannot be answered whether this is truly the case – at least in the absurdist world of the play – for the world to change, it is doubtlessly emphasised that all protagonists are reluctant to change. This is, once more, expressed by the aid of aural blanks. This becomes obvious, for instance, in the following passage:

VLADIMIR: Listen!
They listen, grotesquely rigid.
ESTRAGON: I hear nothing.
VLADIMIR: Hsst! (They listen. Estragon loses his balance, almost falls. He clutches the arm of Vladimir who totters. They listen, huddled together.) Nor I.
Sighs of relief. They relax and separate.
ESTRAGON: You gave me a fright.(p.13)

Here the prospect of hearing something – as it later turns out Vladimir is thinking that he might have heard Godot – is absolutely terrifying to Vladimir and Estragon. The period of listening for something is necessarily filled with silence. Thus they at first listen “grotesquely rigid” (p. 13) which signifies their immobility and reluctance towards change. As Vladimir insists that they listen, however, the threat of something or somebody intruding their endless waiting and ending it becomes unsettling, thus they listen, set off balance, and hold on to each other in silence. When Vladimir acknowledges that he can hear nothing as well, they heave “sighs of relief” (p. 13) and separate again. All in all this passage illustrates the general reluctance towards change in the body language supplementing the aural blank.

Whereas in the above passage the reluctance towards change is expressed in a more subtle, indirect manner, the protagonists at times also actively sabotage change. This is, for
example, the case when the boy arrives with news of Godot: news that can potentially change Vladimir and Estragon’s situation for the better and end their infinite waiting. Before the boy can, however, relate his message he is constantly interrupted by Vladimir’s questions which are of absolutely no relevance to their cause. Thus, Vladimir asks the boy about his nativity, whether he knows Pozzo and Lucky, what delayed him so long etc. Whenever the boy attempts to provide them with true information about Godot, he is cut short as can be seen in the following passage:

BOY. Mr. Godot—
VLADIMIR: I’ve seen you before, haven’t I?
BOY: I don’t know, Sir.
VLADIMIR: You don’t know me?
BOY: No Sir.
VLADIMIR: It wasn’t you came yesterday?
BOY: No Sir.
VLADIMIRL This is your first time?
BOY: Yes Sir.
   Silence.
VLADIMIR: Words words. (Pause.) Speak.
BOY: (in a rush). Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won’t come this evening but surely to-morrow.
   Silence. (p. 33)

For yet another time the boy is interrupted as he wants to tell the message to Vladimir, which results in a brief blank which is more of a semantic than an aural nature. Vladimir immediately chimes in with questions that are not related to the central question, namely ‘What is it that Godot wants them to know?’, at all. What results are silences, until Vladimir, after a moment of hesitation and, perhaps, consideration which is signified by a pause prompts the boy to speak. The boy in turn rushes to finally relate his message, which turns out to be not revolutionary at all. From the content of the message follows only that the waiting is over for the day, but will be resumed the next. Therefore the silence that follows can be read to signify the absence of any real informational or change-worthy value of the message. After the silence, Vladimir continues his interrogation of the boy for a while, but eventually, confronted with the fact that Godot will not appear that day the first act ends.

The same reluctance towards new information is also expressed in a more metareferential way. Here interruptions and aural blanks are used in order to stop narrations or narrative content short. This happens on multiple occasions when Vladimir interrupts Estragon whenever his companion wants to relate his dreams (relating a dream would be very similar
to telling a story.) Additionally, silence is used to point towards the emptiness of literature, for example when Estragon is told by Vladimir that he should have been a poet and simply replies “I was. (Gesture towards his rags.) Isn’t that obvious? / Silence.” (p. 9) Here being a poet is ridiculed on the one hand by conjuring the stereotype of the starving poet, but on the other, and more significantly, it is pointed out by the following silence that being a poet does not really mean something, and indeed the subject of poetry is promptly dropped after the silence. In addition to this admittedly not as strongly foregrounded emptiness of literature, there is a potentially metalingual general in language itself. This distrust is, once more, also expressed by the application of aural blanks, for instance in passages where the characters are searching for the right words or attempt to utter something they are lacking the means of expression for, as is for example the case in Vladimir’s protests of Pozzo’s treatment of Lucky:

VLADIMIR: (stutteringly resolute) To treat a man . . . (gesture towards Lucky) . . . like that . . . I think that . . . no . . . a human being . . . no . . . it’s a scandal! (p. 18)

Here Vladimir’s discourse in insecure and unsettled as he is searching for words. The aural blanks here mark both his indignation and his incapability to appropriately express his protests upon Lucky’s treatment. The aural blanks can, however, be easily filled by the audience with similar reactions of indignation and disgust. In this way, the aural blanks in this passage not only mark a certain linguistic inability, but also strongly foreground the wrongness of treating a human being in the way Lucky is treated.

A further variant of the theme of linguistic inability, particularly the incapability of verbally expressing something, can be seen in the fact that oftentimes conversation is failing or blocked. This becomes for instance obvious as Estragon attempts to address Vladimir, who does not react at first because he has nothing to say to Estragon: “ESTRAGON: (gently). You wanted to speak to me? (Silence. Estragon takes a step forward.) You had something to say to me? (Silence. Another step forward.) Didi. . .”(p. 12). Here the silences illustrate both the absence of something meaningful to say, but also emphasise Vladimir’s unwillingness to fill the silence, to pick up a meaningful conversation and by that, perhaps, making a change in an otherwise empty world where all that happens is infinite waiting.

In addition to these perhaps more convoluted and less straight-forward functions of aural blanks in Waiting for Godot, it is finally important to note that at times aural blanks simply
serve the purpose of foregrounding silence iconically. This is for example obvious in the following passage:

POZZO: [...]Let us not then speak ill of our generation, it is not any unhappier than its predecessors. (Pause.) Let us not speak well of it either. (Pause.) Let us not speak of it at all. (Pause.) (p. 22)

Here Pozzo’s pauses mirror the ‘let us not talk about it’ in three steps. As he states that they should neither speak ill nor good about their generation, he follows with pauses, which means he does as he suggests they should do. Eventually, he reaches the conclusion that they should not speak about it at all, which is followed by a pause – he asks for silence and launches into an aural blank that is, naturally, silence.

In conclusion it can be said that aural blanks in *Waiting for Godot* are used frequently and in a (negatively) meaningful way. The emptiness that, as we will see promptly, appears to be encompassing in *Endgame*, is focussed on a more spiritual emptiness in *Waiting for Godot*, which is nonetheless expressed and foregrounded by the use of aural blanks. In addition, aural blanks foreground silences and absences, but also aid to express linguistic insecurities or emphasise something unspeakable. Lastly, aural blanks go hand in hand with ‘movement blanks’, they mirror the immobility and stasis expressed by the characters also in their speech. Generally, it can thus be said that the use of aural blanks in Beckett clearly aids the overall effect of *Waiting for Godot*, by amongst other functions described above, clearly foregrounding the general absences of the absurdist world.

**4.3.2. Aural Blanks in Beckett, *Endgame***

Already at the very beginning of *Endgame* it becomes painfully clear that the play will be filled with absences. Perhaps most noticeable at first glance are the many pauses that riddle the speech of both Hamm and Clov persistently. While these pauses could be attributed to a curious style or rhetoric, it swiftly becomes obvious that indeed these pauses are highly meaningful in pointing out the emptiness of the world surrounding the two main protagonists. The all-encompassing emptiness that is the world is clearly reflected in the speech of the characters, as shall be discussed extensively shortly.

While this chapter will focus on the aural blanks of *Endgame*, it is important to note that these aural blanks are by far not the only blanks to be found in the play (even though they do render most of the absences more tangible). Thus, the absence of the outside world is also
rendered by a visual blank concerning the scenery as can be seen in the stage directions given at the very beginning of the play or on the actual stage of the performance:

_Bare interior._
_Grey light._
_Left and right back, high up, two small windows, curtains drawn. Front right, a door. Hanging near door, its face to the wall, a picture. (p. 5)._  

The room which will be the only setting of the play is thus only furnished with the bare necessities, there are no extensive props. This means that the room is more or less empty, which reflects the emptiness of the outside world which is constantly pointed out in the play. Secondly, the light is grey: it is neither light nor dark, so there is an absence of both night and day, leaving the stage in a curious state in between light and darkness. The room in this way hovers on the brink of both, light and dark, but fails to conclude the steps into either direction. The light, therefore, points towards the complete and utter absence of anything. More significantly for the emphasis on the lack of an outside world is, however, the location of the windows: not only are they high above so that they cannot be looked through unless Clov gets the steps, they are also curtained so that nothing can be seen through them. Lastly, there is a picture hanging with its face to the wall, thus showing only its presumably empty back. This does not only highlight the general emptiness of the room, but the picture also moves in another curious in-between space: on the one hand it is present, but on the other, by facing the wall and thus veiling its contents, it is also absent. This might be read as an early metareferential gesture towards the meaninglessness of art and language – or that the play turns its back on mimesis -- which will become more obvious in the later course of the play.

The audience is thus already confronted with absence before the play proper has even begun. When the play, however, finally begins it does so in a curious way:

_CLOV: [Fixed gaze, tonelessly]. Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished. [Pause.] Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there’s a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap. [Pause.] [...] Nice dimensions, nice proportions, I’ll lean on the table, and look at the wall, and wait for him to whistle me. [He remains a moment motionless, then goes out. He comes back immediately, goes to the window right, takes up the ladder and carries it out. Pause. (p.6)"

What becomes obvious in this passage is the reason why Andreas Barella (1999: 134) states that “Endgame refuses to start.” Indeed, the audience is confronted with a play that is
already finished as it begins. What results is a curious lack of beginning – for how can a play
that is already finished, at least nearly so, even begin? This lack of any chance for a
beginning and consequentially an action proper is highlighted by the repetition of the
“finished” fact, but also emphasised and foregrounded by the pauses in Clov’s speech.
Indeed, if it is already finished, what could he possibly say or do that makes a difference?
Thus, all Clov can do is stress the fact that everything is finished already. The pause then
signifies the emptiness of what is yet to come, the fact that Clov does not have anything
relevant to say. Additionally, there is a reversal of what is said signified by the second pause:
suddenly, so says Clov, there is a heap, which is followed by a pause. The pause here can
mean two things: firstly, that there is no heap, or more likely, that the heap truly is irrelevant
and does not signify anything. The pause is then there to illustrate that even if there might be
something, it is nothing that needs to be talked about. Thus the meaninglessness is rendered
iconically in the pause: nothing can be said, and truly nothing is said, therefore only a
pause/silence can remain.

It is furthermore important to stress that even though the play appears to be already
finished, there is a repetition of the same in-between state that has been described in
significance of the grey light for the overall emphasis on absence. Indeed, the play hovers on
the brink of ending: it is not fully finished yet, but it is also not beginning. Thus, the same in-
between state that has been seen in between light and darkness is repeated with the
beginning/ending of the play. The same is true for the lives of Clov and Hamm: they never
truly live (at least not meaningfully), but they are also hesitant to die. What results is once
more a curious in between state, where literally everything is absent: there is not only no
ending, even the fact of the absence of a beginning is incomplete, thus stressing the emptiness
and meaninglessness pervading the play even more. Clov’s uncertainty of the finished state
(he moves from “it’s finished” to “nearly finished” and “it must be finished”, p. 64), is
repeated in Hamm’s awakening:

*He [Hamm] yawns under the handkerchief [covering his face]. He removes the
handkerchief from his face. Very red face. Black glasses.*

HAMM: Me – [he yawns] – to play. *[He holds the handkerchief spread out before
him.] Old Stancher! *[He takes off his glasses, wipes his eyes,. His face, the glasses,
puts them on again, folds the handkerchief and puts it neatly in the breast-pocket of
his dressing gown. He clears his throat, joins the tips of his fingers.]* [...]

Enough, it’s time it ended, in the refuge too. *[Pause.] And yet I hesitate, I hesitate
to ... to end. Yes, there it is, it’s time it ended and yet I hesitate to – [he yawns] – to
end. *[Yawns.]* (p. 6)
Even before Hamm begins to speak, the game with the ending and lacking beginning of the play is played. The handkerchief covering Hamm’s face – as is often claimed -- signifies the theatre curtain. He removes it, but holds it spread out in front of him for a moment before putting it in his pocket. This shows the hesitance of the play to begin, or rather end. Additionally, his first words are “Me – [he yawns] – to play.” (p. 6). ‘Play’ here, of course, can also refer to the actor himself playing, thus emphasising the resistance of the play being played. The yawn can be read as an incomplete pause – it certainly is a pause in an arguably meaningful discourse – and, even though not a complete blank, stresses the meaninglessness of the attempt to even begin or rather finish the play. If the play ended right there, however, it would be removed from its state of utter absence where it is neither beginning nor ending, which is, just like in Clov’s hesitance before, expressed in Hamm’s notions: “And yet I hesitate, I hesitate to ... to end. Yes, there it is, it’s time it ended and yet I hesitate to – [he yawns] – to end.” (p.6). Unlike in Clov’s similar ponderings, the pauses are filled with yawns, which render them incomplete aural blanks. The meaning therefore moves more towards the futility of the attempt rather than simply underlining the absence and impossibility of presence pervading this first discourse. Additionally, the hesitance of Hamm is also rendered in his speech, as firstly he repeats the same phrase “I hesitate” continuously, thus clearly foregrounding it while at the same time actually hesitating, fishing for words while he repeats the same phrase, and secondly by the “...”, so to speak a spelled out pause, that actually reflects Hamm’s hesitance clearly.

It can thus be said that already at a very early stage of the play, absences are foregrounded. Firstly, there is the absence of an outside world, which is made visible by the stage design. Secondly, there is the curious fact that the play is ending before it even begins, leaving it in an in-between state where it is neither, simply a static instance of hesitance and repetition entirely lacking situation or a referencing framework. If the play has, however, already ended before it could begin, and if even this termination is meaningless and incomplete, there is a very real consequence for the rest of the play: as it lacks a take-off point it will necessarily also lack a telos, and by that any significant action or movement towards this goal. This lack of teleology is clearly expressed not only in the mostly meaningless or insignificant conversations of the characters, but also in their incapability to actually move towards a goal. Their motions, just like their speech, remain circular and frozen, which can already be seen in the above passage where Clov hesitates to leave for the kitchen in the first place and after eventually having left immediately returns to the room, and
Hamm, after having just awoken, decides that he would be better off in bed. Indeed, the motions performed by the characters are sparse to non-existent, which results in a complete and utter absence of outer action and, respectively, tension in the classical sense. Scenes where something exciting could happen are always swiftly devaluated – and nothing truly ever happens. The best example for this is perhaps Clov pondering killing Hamm: “CLOV: If I could kill him, I’d die happy. / [Pause.]” (p. 19). The pause here signifies that the thought will not be acted upon: instead of action that supposedly would follow in a more classical play (for instance, Clov reaching for a weapon, attacking Hamm or at least plotting against Hamm) is absent, which is represented in the pause immediately following this potentially action-inducing event.

Pauses in the speech of the characters can therefore mark a lack of teleology as well as an absence of action, which is also clearly represented in the circular and directionless movements performed by the characters throughout the play. Absence, therefore, looms large already in the beginning of *Endgame* and will, as one might expect from a Beckett play, never leave it again.

The general absence of meaning, of content, and a general outside world is usually clearly expressed and highlighted in the character’s fragmented, pause-riddled speech. This can, for example, be seen in the passages where Hamm forces Clov to observe the outside world, which is of course absent:

Hamm: [Gesture towards window right.] Have you looked?
Clov: Yes.
Hamm: Well?
Clov: Zero.
Hamm: It’d need to rain.
Clov: It won’t rain.
[Pause] (p. 7)

In this passage that will be repeated frequently in a similar fashion throughout the play, the outside world becomes a ‘zero’, a blank that is filled only with nothingness. This is also signified by Clov’s observation that it will not rain, for there is nothing anymore, not even rain. The absence of rain as a metonymy for the outside absence as a whole is then immediately highlighted by an aural blank, which consequently mirrors the outside absence in the dialogue. Additionally, the pause also emphasises the emptiness of the conversation per se, a conversation that will be repeated again and which, presumably, has been ritually
repeated already in the past. Thus, the words themselves become meaningless and empty, which leads Clov to an inevitable pause which cannot be filled with conversation, observations, information or anything else, for there simply is nothing left in existence.

The same use of pauses as iconic mirrors of absences can be seen on multiple occasions throughout the play, for instance in the following passage:

CLOV: [answering the question why he stays with Hamm] Why do you keep me?
HAMM: There’s no one else.
CLOV: There’s nowhere else.
[Pause.] (p. 8)

Here the observations that there is nobody else and nowhere else for either Hamm or Clov leads to a pause that not only mirrors the observations of emptiness, but which equally highlights the feelings of nothingness; the ‘nowhere’ and ‘nobody’ is thus rendered more tangible and can be more immanently felt by an empathising audience.

The general and all-encompassing absence pervading the play is never lifted or filled by anything. On the contrary, the absence is even deepened, significantly again by the use of aural blanks, as can be seen in a later repetition of the ‘looking out of the window to find nothing’ scene:

CLOV: [...] [He looks, moving the telescope on the without.] Let’s see. [He looks, moving the telescope.] Zero... [he looks]... zero... [he looks]... and zero.
HAMM: Nothing stirs. All is –
CLOV: Zer-
HAMM: [Violently.] Wait till you’re spoken to! [Normal voice.] All is... all is... all is what? [Violently.] All is what? (p. 20)

The omnipresent and oppressive presence of nothingness is here increased firstly by the introduction of ‘...’, pauses within Clov’s speech. Following his pauses and statements of ‘zero’ the audience gains the impression that truly there is nothing but a vast emptiness outside. Additionally, even the ‘zero’ becomes increasingly empty as Clov is interrupted before he can even finish the word. The ‘zero’ which signifies absence per se becomes clipped and incomplete, thus moves from a state to signifying absence (but signifying something at least) to a state of utter disintegration. Not only is the absence omnipresent, but it also becomes unnameable as even the sign signifying it vanishes into nothingness, into non-existence. This thickening of absence is what makes Hamm angry, not the fact that he is
interrupted by Clov. His dismay is emphasised in the pauses in his own speech, marking an incredulous despair of finding something in the encompassing nothingness, once more at a loss for words but searching for them nonetheless, and failing pitifully. What remains after his distressed attempt to create meaning, to provide an answer for what the absence is and signifies, Hamm is reduced to an open question which might unsettle the audience in a similar fashion as it does Hamm: All is what? Indeed, all is nothing and everything is nothing, which is why the passage is marked by the unsettling absence of an answer.

Hamm’s dismay in this passage also marks another absence pervading the play, namely the absence of any linguistic certitude as well as the devaluation and futility of creating either meaningful speech or fiction. This typically post-modern move towards the meaninglessness of art and language with reference to truth or true representation is also underlined by the use of aural blanks.

Besides the fact that conversation in *Endgame* is riddled by pauses and that the discourse is mostly repetitive and hollow, acts of attempted story-telling are always cut short or incomplete in the play. Firstly, Hamm’s parents are hindered in their recollections of the past by an impaired channel between them. They are living in bins on stage, and can thus not move towards each other. Their sight is failing, and as it turns out so is their hearing. Communication is thus already difficult or impossible per se, and even the little communication that might take place is ended forcefully by Hamm ordering Clov to close the lids of their bins again. Hamm’s own attempts of story-telling or adopting a more artful tone are equally as pitiful, as can, for instance, be seen already at the very beginning of the play: “HAMM: [...]Can there be misery – [he yawns] – loftier than mine? No doubt. Formerly. But now? [Pause.] My father? [Pause.] My mother? [Pause.] My . . . dog? [Pause.]” (p. 6). The rather poetic phrase “Can there be misery loftier than mine” (p. 6) stands out from the rest of the discourse because the diction, elsewhere rather colloquial in style, is more elaborate, and additionally the phrase actually contains a tetrameter which naturally must stick out. The poetic phrase is, however, interrupted and devaluated by Hamm’s yawn. He is, in fact, utterly uninterested in his own poetics, and thus has no problem with interrupting his own creation. Additionally, the pauses to follow point towards the emptiness of the poetic phrase issued only moments before, for how can there be poetics about misery when truly there is no more misery or its opposite has vanished? Thus, the first pause signifies the absence of deeply felt misery, the following pauses the absence of emotion within Hamm’s parents. Lastly, the attempt of creating something poetic is entirely ridiculed by Hamm’s complete failure to
create something potentially substantial: running out of relatives, and thus people who might actually serve as foils to feel something, to empathise or sympathise with, he hesitantly draws the attention to his dog. The ‘...’ preceding the mentioning of the dog of course signify Hamm’s hesitation to complete the phrase, his struggle to fill in something less disrupting of the poetic flow – but, of course, he fails in the attempt thus leaving the audience with no creation other than meaninglessness.

The same devaluation of Hamm’s own fiction can be seen on various occasions. The story Hamm attempts to tell is never finished, and even the fragments that are transmitted, are riddled by pauses, lapses and fresh attempts. Moreover, just like the play itself, Hamm’s story is already finished, as he acknowledges himself after relating in an incomplete and hesitant way: “I’ll soon have finished this story. [Pause.] Unless I bring in other characters. [Pause.] But where would I find them? [Pause.]” (p. 33). The second pause underlines the fact that there will be no other characters, and the third pause drives home the point Hamm made himself: there is nowhere to find new characters. The same observations made by Hamm in this passage hold true for the entirety of the play: captured in an ambient state, the play can only last as long as it does, unless other characters or action would be introduced – which, of course, is not the case. Thus, as incapable of telling a story as Hamm is, he is also part of a similarly absent story in the form of the play itself.

The meaninglessness and futility of narrative discourse and language as a positive signifying practice becomes eventually most clear at the ending of the play, where Hamm switches back and forth between narrative and non-narrative mode, devaluing his own narration and poetic aspiration as they occur:


What at first appears to be a successful poetic act in that far as Hamm actually manages to create a verse line that pleases him, the act soon vanishes into meaninglessness as Hamm’s poetics are simply that, ‘nicely put’ and without any consequence. Whereas the first pauses of the passage represent the poetic mind at work, the attempt of finding the right words and correcting what has already been said for a better version until the phrase finally even gains a chant-like, almost magical quality, the short-lived success of poetry is swiftly ended by its
own meaninglessness. This is again represented by the use of aural blanks. With the finished verse as well as Hamm’s own acknowledgement of it, there follows another pause. This pause can either be interpreted as a sort of contemplative, pleased silence which allows the poetic line to stand out some more, or it can be a pause already foreshadowing that there is nothing else to come. The verse has been chanted, only once at that, and now there is nothing left to follow but emptiness. This becomes even more clear in Hamm’s question “And now?” (p.49) followed by another significant pause. Hamm has spent his creative ability on a verse that was only temporarily relevant at best and is now confronted with yet another encompassing emptiness that needs to be filled. With the creative act failing, Hamm is confronted with the question of what else he could do to fill the emptiness. The answer is not given verbally, however, but can be found in the final pause of the above passage: indeed, there is nothing that can be done, thus only silence remains.

Hamm is, however, not yet ready to accept the fact that there is only emptiness. In the following, he takes turns in adopting a narrative tone and a normal tone and attempts another form of literature, telling a story. This story is, however, also riddled by pauses and utterly meaningless, and can thus not liberate him from the oppressive emptiness around him. The realisation that there is truly nothing left he could do or even half-heartedly attempt leads Hamm to ‘discarding’ his last worldly binds, his parents, the gaff, his dog, and the whistle with which he used to call Clov. This discarding of physical objects is, however, also a discarding of the last remnants of hope and a discarding of futile attempts of filling the void with meaning. Consequently the play ends focussing on an entirely defeated Hamm:

Hamm: [...] [He takes out the handkerchief.] Since that’s the way we’re playing it . . . [he unfolds handkerchief] . . . let’s play it that way . . . [he unfolds] . . . and speak no more about it . . . [he finishes unfolding] . . . speak no more. [He holds the handkerchief spread out before him.] Old stancher! [Pause.] You . . . remain. [Pause. He covers his face with handkerchief, lowers his arms to armrests, remains motionless.] [Brief tableau.]

CURTAIN (p. 50).

This passage on the one hand shows the same hesitation of letting the play end as was already present at the very beginning of the play. Where at the beginning of the play there was pointed out that there was truly nothing, the ending of the play repeats this nothingness in an even more fatalistic manner: truly there is nothing but the “old stancher” that remains.
Hamm, however, is not really a meaningful existence: he can merely repeat the same rituals day by day, and is not able to create something meaningful to fill the encompassing void. This explains the aural blanks applied to Hamm’s speech: he realises that nothing but himself is left and that speech is no longer of interest to him, but, as is signified by the pauses, he also understands that this ‘remnant’ is entirely meaningless.

Additionally, it is important to emphasise the strongly metadramatic quality of this passage. As this is the way we play it – which draws attention to the fact that *Endgame* is truly a play or game on the one hand, and on the other also includes the audience in the act of participating in the game – there is nothing more to speak about, and nothing shall be spoken any longer. This advice is immediately followed by the application of aural blanks, thus the silence that is asked for is rendered more tangible for the audience. Moreover, the game with the handkerchief/theatre curtain is once more repeated. In the pseudo narrative passage, Hamm has already taken out his handkerchief, but kept putting it back. Now that everything is ‘discarded’, now that even the last possible bastion of hope – art and literature – has been devaluated, Hamm is ready to truly end the game. Thus, he unfolds the handkerchief, holds it in front of himself, and finally once more covers his face with the handkerchief, which, of course, signifies the falling of the curtain which will occur after the brief tableau which enables the audience to take in the dire situation in greater detail.

That said, it becomes obvious that one of the main functions of the aural blanks in *Endgame* is a metadramatic one: the pauses riddle not only the play itself, but also Hamm’s attempts of creating any form of literary discourse. Language is defective and failing. Conversation is empty and repetitive. This is eventually understood by Hamm, and it leads him to, at least for himself, truly ‘discard’ all hope, as even the little that remains to be done, namely speech and language, is just a meaningless scream against encompassing silence (cf. Hart Nibbrig 1981: 225).

The silence has, however, long become encompassing. The nothingness is consistently expressed in the many aural blanks, sometimes even in order to turn around a ‘fullness’ statement and point out that truly, the statement is nothing but thin air. Thus Clov answers Hamm’s question about what is happening with “Something is taking its course. [Pause.]” (p.22). The pause here signifies that Clov is actually not right, as nothing (signified by the pause) is taking its course. A statement like that would necessitate an explanation of what it might be that is taking its course, but no such explanation follows. On the contrary, Hamm,
overly excited about the ‘something’ suspects that perhaps “We’re not beginning to... to...mean something?” (p. 22). The hesitation in Hamm’s speech already signifies that he does not truly believe in the something himself, but that he finds it necessary to ask Clov about it. Clov on the other hand answers Hamm simply with a laugh as if believing in something were merely a joke. Hamm insists, but is stopped by the absolutely redundant fact that Clov has a flea, which is then played out for a great number of lines. The same gesture of saying something and actually meaning nothing is repeated on various occasions throughout the play, for instance in Hamm’s reply to Clov’s question what there is for him if he stays with Hamm: “HAMM: The dialogue. [Pause.]” (p. 36). The dialogue is not truly a dialogue, however, as it is empty and meaningless. This is clearly signified by the following pause and the lack of explanation of what the two of them actually like to talk about, or a hint of a particularly lively conversation. Aural blanks in Endgame can therefore be used to express an emptiness that is underlying the farce of the intangible ‘something’. The blanks reveal the absence even when what is presented on the surface is presence and meaning.

Lastly there is one more absence to be noted: the absence and failing of the senses. Not only do the characters of the play live in an empty world, they are also impaired in witnessing what might still be there. Thus, Hamm cannot walk and is blind. Even if he were not, he is wearing black glasses for almost the entirety of the play, so that even if he could see, his sight would be significantly impaired by the glasses in the grey light. Nagg and Nell, living as heads in bins on the stage, are not only shut out from the sparse outside world, but also their sight is failing and, as they discuss how glad they are that they can still hear, it becomes obvious that their hearing fails as well. Eventually this lack of senses climaxes in the utter absence of life and so Hamm’s parents die on stage. This absence of senses means that even if there were something to be experienced – which is highly unlikely in the play – it could only be experienced in a very limited and impaired way. These absences function clearly without the aid of aural blanks, but had to be mentioned for the sake of completion.

In conclusion it can thus be said that Beckett’s Endgame is truly a play that features absences on many levels. Most of these absences are enhanced and made more tangible by the frequent use of aural blanks, which either iconically render the absence of something or lay bare that the putative presence of something is just an absence in disguise. The frequency with which pauses and hesitations are introduced into the speech of all characters already suggests that aural blanks in Endgame function as an important stylistic means: indeed, it would be hard if not impossible to experience the bleakness of the Endgame-world as well as
the inability of the characters to create something of meaning as fully as one can thanks to the aural blanks interrupting the speech of the characters and thus rendering silence tangible for the audience.


After this detailed discussion of aural blanks in drama let us now focus on aural blanks in poetry using a classic example, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven”. As is probably a well-known fact, the poem establishes a certain metre and rhythmic scheme that greatly contributes to the aesthetics of the poem. What is remarkable for my purposes is, however, that the shorter lines (which thus sport clear aural blanks as they lack stresses) mirror feelings of absence, physical absences of a beloved, the absence of meaning and death. While this could be argued to be a coincidence, such a coincidence appears to be unlikely. Firstly, it is too consistent to be mere coincidence. Secondly, after perusing Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition” where the writer outlines his aesthetic ideals and clearly states that he uses certain words, sounds and topics for the sole reason of their effect, it becomes unlikely that Poe would actually compose a poem such as “The Raven” (which is discussed in the “Philosophy of Composition” as an example) arbitrarily.

Poe’s poem “The Raven” in this way, and in the opinion of the author himself, applies itself to both popular taste and the taste of critics. “The Raven” is a narrative poem in which an unknown speaker, possibly a student or scholar, relates the events of a bleak December night. In accordance with the in Poe’s opinion most poetic subject – the death of a beautiful woman – the speaker is torn in between remembrance and wanting to forget. Captured in the pain of having lost his beloved, the speaker encounters the eponymous raven, a creature either heavenly or hellish, who croaks nothing more than “nevermore”. Some authors read the events as a slow descent of the speaker into madness, which seems probable at least from our point of view where the supernatural is equalled to superstition. At Poe’s time, however, the supernatural was arguably still more accepted and probable to be believed. Whether or not we want to read the speaker as slowly descending into madness, a for my purposes central theme remains: the theme of absence.
Absence in the “Raven” is omnipresent. Indeed, the very core of the poem centres around the absence of “Lenore”, the young lady who has died. In this way, death also becomes a central theme – particularly if we consider the fact that ravens or crows often represent death, or are seen as harbingers of death (sitting, for example, on the gallows and hacking at the eyes of the dead) – and death, in our world which is structured by binary oppositions, is nothing more than the absence of life. More subtly suggested, there is also an absence of light. It is a bleak December, it is night, the light in the room is flickering and insufficient. Lastly, the question of a possible absence of God and religion is raised in the later portion of the poem, which clearly renders “The Raven” more problematic on a spiritual level than a typically Romantic gothic tale in poem-form with an emphasis on suffering and emotion.

As has become evident in the examples discussed so far, a density of absences on the thematic level frequently is tied to absences in the form of blanks. Unsurprisingly, blanks are therefore regular and frequent in Poe’s “The Raven”. Most striking are certainly the many, many hypocatalectic verses that are repeated regularly in every stanza.

Before we can launch into a discussion of the function of these aural blanks, it shall at first be noted that Poe’s “The Raven” is stylistically and particularly metrically extremely regular. Nothing is left to circumstance, there is no arbitrary foot off. Instead, the poem is composed in a regular trochaic octameter, which usually includes the first five verses of each stanza. The last verse of each stanza is shortened and usually only half as long, as it consists of a regular tetrameter. Although such a deviation can be part of an established form – for instance in the ballad meter where the stanzas follow a regular alteration between four and three stresses per verse – this is not the case in “The Raven” as the poem does not follow any established form. The last verse of each stanza can thus be read as hypocatalectic, if metrically regular verse used to express and foreground various absences. Furthermore, the octameter is applied to the greater portion of the text, and as it introduces the poem as a whole I assume the octameter to be the basic metre of the poem, from which the last line of each stanza deviates. This also makes sense from a point of view of reception: the last line of each stanza stands out to us as shorter and incomplete.

What results is a regular rhythmic and metrical form that deviates consistently and deliberately from the trochaic octameter which is the basic meter of the poem. What results is a form that can be applied to each stanza and which looks the following: verse lines -5 of
each stanza are regular, trochaic octameter, whereas the final verse of each stanza is cut short by employing a tetrameter.

While this way of introducing aural blanks into the poem leaves the meter more intact than was the case in the Shakespeare examples discussed earlier, they nonetheless clearly function as hypocatalectic verses in the way I have described above. Indeed we can describe the stanzas generally in the following way. Lines 1-3 introduce the situation, agitation and events. Lines 4-5 can introduce or deal with absences, but mainly slow down the poem by being rather repetitious. Lastly, the last verse line of each stanza foregrounds absence and, by the brevity of the line, makes it tangible.

The above schema – if we comprehend it to be a flexible framework rather than a set in stone prescription – can be applied to every stanza of the poem, with the general effect of foregrounding absence or silence. Let us examine the first stanza more closely:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,  
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—  
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,  
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.  
“T’is some visiter,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door—  
Only this and nothing more. (ll. 1-6)

If this stanza is read, we immediately notice the emphasis on the last verse, as it is indented, featuring a visual blank preceding it. This visual blank is realised as an aural blank, however, if the poem is read. We see in this stanza that lines 1-3 are indeed introducing new information, in this case a temporal (midnight) as well as spatial setting (it must be a room, probably a study). Additionally, the speaker is introduced; he is “weak and weary”, likely due to the late hour, and studying. The “quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore” (l. 2) also can be interpreted as introducing the theme of the supernatural pervading the poem, as it is imaginable that such a volume of forgotten lore is actually concerned with black magic or similarly occult knowledge. Lines 4-5 then stop both the flow of new information as well as the driven, agitated flow of the octameter. Both lines repeat the information already given, namely that there “came a tapping” (l. 3), which is in the verses identified as someone rapping at the chamber door. Lines 4-5 are obviously repetitious in that they repeat the word “rapping” (l. 4) twice, and follow it up by the similar sounding “tapping” (l. 5). Additionally, the latter part of each verse is an epiphora, which emphasises the repetitiveness of the lines even more. The repetitiveness of the verses contributes to a certain ‘slowing down’ effect that
prepares for the last verse line. Lines 4-5 thus lack significant new information (they are, in this way, already sporting absence – the absence of new information), and feature an aural blank which slows down the meter. This has the natural result that the emphasis falls on the last verse line which is most concerned with absence. It is, in this stanza, “Only this and nothing more” (l. 6). The nothing more is rendered as an aural blank: there is nothing more, therefore the verse falls short, which clearly foregrounds the absence of anything more in this verse.

The same schema is repeated in the following stanzas, whereas it is important to note that the last verse of the respective stanza is varied in the form of absence. Therefore, stanza 2, mainly concerned with the absence of Lenore, stresses her absence by the hypocatalectic verse “Nameless here for evermore.” (l. 12). The oppressiveness of the speaker’s memory of Lenore is here emphasised; she is nameless here, on the physical plane, and this forever. Stanza 3, in a similar fashion, focuses on visual absence, the last verse reads “Darkness there and nothing more” (l. 18), here the aural blank mirrors the blackness and the ‘nothing more’ that can be seen. Additionally, as in the first stanza the speaker opens the door to find out who is rapping at his door, the aural blank in this stanza also enhances the suspense as nothing can be seen although we might expect something.

The following stanzas continue in a similar fashion, introducing relevant new information or action in the first few verses, slowing down the flow of the poem, and emphasising the absence in the last verse of the stanza by the use of the repeated aural blank. Whereas the first half of the poem focuses mainly on the absence of Lenore and the resulting sorrow of the speaker, the middle portion of the poem introduces a questioned spirituality/Christian belief. This becomes perhaps most obvious in the following stanza of the poem:

"Prophet!", said I; “Thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels Name Lenore—
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.”
Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.” (ll. 91-96)

While this stanza employs the same schema outlined above, it also clarifies and foregrounds a question that is already subtly raised in the preceding stanzas, namely whether or not there is a Heaven, or a life after death. The raven in this stanza becomes an ambiguous symbol of both life and death, good or evil – it is no longer possible to tell whether the bird is
sent from Heaven or Hell. The raven’s unceasing answer “Nevermore”, however, perhaps suggests the latter, as it implies that there is no Heaven in which the speaker can be re-united with his deceased beloved. Thus, the last verse of the stanza truly renders the absence of a Heaven/life after death, as well as the absence of the beloved not only more tangible, but also permanent, as the loss of Lenore is now void of hope for a reunion in the afterlife. It is, therefore, understandable that the speaker becomes increasingly agitated as the raven increasingly becomes a harbinger of permanent absence. Interestingly, the last two stanzas of the poem then follow in a slightly different fashion, as they both foreground the general and irretrievable absence by emphasising the permanent presence of the raven as a harbinger of absence. This is perhaps most obvious in the last stanza of the poem:

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting  
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;  
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,  
And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;  
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor  
Shall be lifted—nevermore! (ll.103-08)

As the raven – now undoubtedly demon and not angel – becomes a permanent presence on the bust of Pallas, the sorrow and loss become permanent as well. The absence of hope as well as the presence of loss is once more clearly foregrounded by the use of a hypocatalectic last verse. Therefore, the last stanza foregrounds absence not only by employing aural blanks, but also by highlighting the symbol of absence, namely the raven himself.

Lastly, there is one more absence that has so far been neglected: the absence of a rhyme in the third line of each stanza. While this rhyme blank – maybe best sorted into the category of aural blanks as rhyme is a mostly aural phenomenon – does not necessarily mark or foreground absences of any kind, it nonetheless marks the turning point where the stanza begins to ‘lose’ information, and begins to focus more on the absences present in the respective stanza. It can thus perhaps be said that the orphaned rhyme is the first subtle foregrounding of the absence yet to follow in the stanza.

It has thus been established that Poe’s poem “The Raven” categorically utilises aural blanks in order to underline the feelings of loss and emptiness as felt by the speaker. Furthermore, the aural blanks can signify the absolute loss in form of a final death, as well as the absence – or at least questionable presence – of an afterlife/Christian Heaven. Aural
blanks in “The Raven” are thus manifold, signifying and regularly employed as a stylistic means discursively emphasising the questions raised in the poem.

Aural blanks have thus been shown to be not only frequent in both drama and poetry, but also usually meaningful in several ways. Consequently, aural blanks should not be underestimated in an analysis of plays or poems concerned with loss or absence in general. Indeed, aural blanks can contribute significantly to the overall effect of a work, and are usually not arbitrarily present in a text.

5.) Visual Blanks

In the same way as aural blanks do not lend themselves willingly to prose, visual blanks do not lend themselves easily to drama. Other than if a drama is read – which is, as I have already argued, not the way in which a play is meant to primarily be perceived -- it is indeed extremely difficult to employ a visual blank in a play. We might perhaps reminisce about the blackout in Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*, where the visual blank would simply be a stage in darkness, or argue about a lack of props and wings as a visual expression of absence on stage. These examples are, however, rare and maybe more fruitfully described by utilising other forms of blanks than visual ones as has already be done in the previous chapters. My discussion of visual blanks, for this reason, will be limited to prose and poetry, whereas this time poetry will be presupposed to be read rather than ‘performed’.

As human beings are highly visual animals, the question of supplementation seems to have a greater impact on the recipient. Non-supplemented visual blanks seem to be more striking and unusual than supplemented ones, whereas in the case of aural blanks this distinction does not seem to have a similarly strong effect. This is not to say, however, that non-supplemented visual blanks have a more striking and forceful function – I simply mean to say that bound to our senses, the visual sense and the complete and unexpected absence of print on a page, seems to be more startling than a prolonged silence in a play. This is the reason why I have opted to describe supplemented and non-supplemented visual blanks separately.
In the following, I will strive to outline first supplemented visual blanks in examples taken from George Herbert’s poetry, Sterne’s glorious *Tristram Shandy* as well as Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, and second non-supplemented visual blanks in Emily Dickinson’s poetry and, once again, *Tristram Shandy*.

What becomes obvious from my selection of examples is that indeed visual blanks have been applied to poetry and prose from as early as 1633 (the publication of Herbert’s *The Temple*) to Modern and contemporary times. Visual blanks, in accordance with the other blanks described so far, are thus not an isolated phenomenon but a rather frequent device of sense-making.

Now, without further ado, let us focus on visual, non-supplemented blanks with the first examples from poetry, George Herbert’s “Easter Wings” and “The Altar”.

### 5.1. Visual, Non-Supplemented Blanks

#### 5.1.1. Visual, non-supplemented Blanks in Poetry: George Herbert’s “Easter Wings” and “The Altar” as Iconic Testaments of Absence

As a metaphysical poet, George Herbert’s volume *The Temple*, from which my examples are taken, is concerned with religious topics as well as the relationship between men and God. Herbert’s poetry, as is noted also in the introduction to his work as printed in the Norton Anthology, is often marked by “[...]a remarkable intellectual and emotional range, and a highly conscious artistry that is evident in the poems’ tight construction, exact diction, perfect control of tone, and enormously varied stanzaic form and rhythmic patterns.” (2006: 1605). This “highly conscious artistry”, however, is also expressed in the visually signifying character of some of Herbert’s poems.

This visual and additional signification looms large in Herbert’s “Easter Wings”. As it is a difficult task to describe a visual phenomenon without the other party being able to see it, I have opted to reproduce the entire poem at this point for illustrating purposes:

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poor:
With thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did begin:
And still with sicknesses and shame.
Thou didst so punish sin,
That I became
Most thin.
With thee
Let me combine,
And feel thy victory;
For, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

Even before the poem is read for the very first time, and therefore before any sort of content can be gathered, it already speaks loud and clear by its visual shape and form. It must be noted that in the original edition, the poem was printed in a 90 degree rotation, so that indeed the shape of the poem resembled the eponymous “Easter Wings”. Thus, the wing-shape becomes instantly clear, and introduces a theme of flight, freedom, and ascension even before any part of the poem is read. The title, “Easter Wings”, closes the gap to the religious aspect of the poem: it is metaphysical, not literal wings, the poem is concerned with. Even in the modern print edition it is easy to imagine the wings – the form, however, does gain a new and fitting meaning as well. Printed as above, the wing-shape can also resemble the shape of an hourglass. In this case, the poem iconically mirrors the passing of time, the ticking away of our lives and, finally, our death which is, in a religious sense, not the end but rather a joyful ascension to Heaven and into an everlasting life of bliss.

The shape of the poem therefore already renders the poem highly iconic. The poem, however, does not content itself by this simple and obvious mirroring of the enounced on the level of enunciation. On the contrary, the same gesture towards iconicity as a means of increased sense-making is repeated within the poem itself. The shape of the poem necessitates that some verse-lines are longer than others, while some are shorter or extremely short and surrounded by visual blanks. These short verse-lines are, however, not composed
arbitrarily but mimic the meaning of the respective verse on the level of enunciation. Thus, the first stanza presupposes a world where man is created in “wealth and store” (l.1), which is reflected by the use of a long line. The poem continues, however, to describe the loss of this original wealth and store, which is “decaying more and more” (l.3), in the same way as the poem ‘decays’ as the verse lines become shorter and visually more and more isolated. The shortest two lines of the first stanza then are “most poor” and “with thee”. (ll. 5-6). The “most poor” is the result of the gradual decay that has been marked by an increasing visual absence. This state of extreme poverty is marked by being the narrowest line of the stanza, surrounded only by absence. This absence of wealth and store is iconically mirrored on the level of enunciation as the absence expressed in the stanza becomes visual. “Most poor” is surrounded by visual blanks, it stands isolated within a textual absence, which clearly foregrounds the state of loss man is confronted with at this point of the poem. Line 6 then marks a turning point, as the lines become gradually more ‘wealthy’ again: the speaker wishes to rise with God to return to the original state of wealth. The last line of the stanza, “Then shall the fall further the flight in me.” (l. 10) then restores at least some of the original wealth, again mirrored iconically by the length of the line and the absence of a visual blank. The flight, ascension to Heaven, is furthered by the “fall”, which is, of course, no paradoxical fall but the concept of the fortunate fall which brought humankind a redeemer. Thus, the last line of the stanza redeems the speaker; the original state of wealth is renewed if not entirely restored.

The same pattern is then repeated in the second stanza of the poem, whereas it does not presuppose a state of wealth, but rather an abundance of sorrow as created by the fall of man. Here the long lines mark the copious sorrow felt by the fall of man. The (just) punishment leads to the speaker becoming “most thin” (l. 15). The thinness again co-occurs with the narrowest portion of the stanza. It therefore clearly mirrors the state of thinness and absence iconically. The following line (l. 16), then again marks the turning point from (abundant) sorrow into joy: combined with Christ, the speaker can ascend towards Heaven, and “Affliction shall advance the flight in [him]” (l. 20). The abundance of sorrow that comprised the first portion of the stanza thus becomes a means of furthering the flight; it is positive suffering in that it is necessary for the advancement of the ascent towards Heaven. The poem thus ends with a long line, iconically resembling the original state of wealth and store.

In conclusion it can thus be said that “Easter Wings” utilises visual blanks to enhance and underline both abundance and lack. Visual blanks signify absences or loss, whereas the lack
of visual blanks signifies passages concerned with abundance. Visual blanks in this way become an important contributor to the overall effect of the poem and are clearly aiding the density of sense within the poem, while additionally making parts of the content obvious already on the first glance.

Similar tactics are employed in “The Altar”:

A broken A L T A R, Lord, thy servant rears,
Made of a heart, and cemented with tears:
   Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
   No workman’s tool hath touched the same.
   A H E A R T alone
   Is such a stone,
   As nothing but
   Thy power doth cut.
   Wherefore each part
   Of my hard heart
   Meets in this frame,
   To praise thy Name;
   That, if I chance to hold my peace,
   These stones to praise thee may not cease.
O let thy blessed S A C R I F I C E be mine,
And sanctify this A L T A R to be thine.

As in “Easter Wings” it becomes immediately evident that the shape of the poem iconically mirrors its title and content. Therefore, the poem “The Altar” is visually shaped like an altar, which naturally results in broader and narrower passages, which are necessarily surrounded by visual blanks. Just like in “Easter Wings”, the narrow passages once more co-occur with absences. The altar of the poem is the heart of the speaker, which is shaped alone by God and has not been touched by a “workman’s tool” (l. 4), which refers to a Bible passage where God instructs Moses to build an altar with his bare hands out of uncut stones. The speaker, in a similar fashion to Moses, offers his ‘personal’ altar, his feeling and emotive heart, to God. As the altar shape of the poem reaches the narrow middle passage (ll. 5-13), the poem is thematically concerned with ‘being cut’ and absence. Therefore, the speaker has “A HEART alone” (l. 5), and indeed the heart is isolated within a narrow passage, surrounded only by a preposition and a modifier informing the reader that the heart is “alone”. This lonely heart is then likened to the altar stones, which can only be cut by God’s power: and indeed the according lines are ‘cut’, as they are surrounded by visual blanks which signify
what has been cut away already. Moreover, each part of the heart “meet in this frame, / to praise thy Name” (ll.12-13). The heart is thus framed iconically by the visual blank surrounding it. The praising of the Lord’s name, then, transfers the poem to the altar’s basis: “That if I chance to hold my peace, / These stones to praise thee may not cease.” (ll. 14-15). Religious worship is what builds the basis of the altar: only through proper worship and sacrifice, likened to Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice, the altar’s foundation can be built, which is also expressed by the longer lines which are not ‘cut’ and surrounded by visual blanks.

Visual blanks are thus utilised in George Herbert’s poetry to iconically express states of absence, loss, narrowness and being ‘cut’ and ‘framed’ by God’s hand. Conversely, the absence of visual blanks then, by means of binary opposition, suggests states of fullness, wealth and completeness. Therefore, two deceptively simple poems gain new layers of meaning by the use of the visual space on the page. This additional meaning clearly foregrounds the central themes of both poems, but also makes the central ideas visible and tangible.

5.1.2. Visual, Non-Supplemented Blanks in Prose: Jonathan Safran Foer, Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close is a contemporary novel concerned with the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre on 9/11. Main protagonist, 10-year old Oskar Scheller, loses his father during the 9/11 attacks. The novel describes the young boy’s struggle to come to terms with his father’s untimely death – as a coping strategy, Oskar goes on a quest which he (falsely) believes has been left behind by his father, namely the seemingly impossible task of finding the lock to a key he has found in a blue vase in a cupboard. The fact that Oskar himself is mainly concerned with grief and loss already hints towards a central absence in the novel: namely the absence of the deceased father, the absence of life, and the oppressing resulting feelings of loss and senselessness. The same feelings of loss, even having lost everything without it ever being retrievable, are repeated in a similar fashion in the story of Oskar’s grandparents, whose respective stories are woven into the novel in letter form. Both grandparents lived in Dresden during the Dresden bombing, and lost their respective families. Most importantly for the plot of the novel, Oskar’s grandmother’s pregnant sister Anna – also the great love of Oskar’s grandfather – died during the attack. Years later Oskar’s grandparents meet again in America, and form a
bond that is more signified by the wish of not being alone, of filling the void left behind, than true love.

Thus, the perhaps most central theme of the novel is the theme of loss, the absence of something to hold on to, and the efforts undertaken to get by and fill a void left behind by violent events – terrorist attack or Dresden bombing. It can thus be said that the novel thematically centres on absences. These absences, however, are also strongly expressed on the level of discourse, mainly by the use of non-supplemented visual blanks.

Before these visual blanks shall be discussed in greater detail, it is necessary to note that *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is a highly visual novel in general. Included are not only what feels to the reader like exact replicas of the letters, but also a great number of illustrations and visual aids which lend the fiction a great amount of authenticity. Among these visual additions are the aforementioned visual blanks, which shall be discussed shortly.

Whereas other forms of blanks are certainly present within the novel, the visual blanks appear to be the most persistent and striking ones. The main protagonists are, furthermore, attributed different forms of ‘blanks’ which identify their discourse almost immediately. The visual absences in this case function as a means of identification of the speaker: most clearly imbued with visual blanks are the grandmother’s letters, which feature a typical typeset consistently including extra spaces. Second in line is the grandfather’s letters, which are generally verbalised perfectly, but include visual absences which will be described in detail promptly. Lastly, Oskar’s own discourse is relatively free of visual absences; the blanks attributed to him are of a more thematic nature, namely the loss of his father.

Besides the thematic absences that become obvious almost immediately within the novel, we first encounter blanks in the first letter of Oskar’s grandfather Thomas. Thomas is writing letters to Oskar’s father, the son he has never met. Having lost his unborn child during the Dresden bombing, Thomas left his wife when he found out about her pregnancy to avoid feeling the same hurt, the same impossible loss again. Perhaps not happy about this decision, he keeps writing letters to his son (Oskar’s father), which he never sends. This not sending of letters results in another significant absence: in the grandmother’s closet, empty envelopes (not containing the letters) are piling up. The envelopes thus miss the words which Thomas, significantly, is not able to express in any other way than writing as he has lost his speech a long time ago.
This loss of speech is what renders this first encounter with one of Thomas’ letters very interesting in terms of absences. Firstly, the reader learns that Thomas is mute. The story of Thomas losing his speech is outlined in the letter although no reason for the communication stop is given. Secondly, the reader learns that in order to communicate Thomas carries around notebooks. On each page of the book the phrases he generally uses are written down, so that he can flip through the pages and point at what he means to say. Pages of the notebook are reproduced in Thomas’ letters and thus also in the novel. The fact that each page only contains a single phrase, however, inevitably leads to the fact that there is a lot of visual blank space surrounding them.

As Thomas first describes his notebook, the rest of the page is left blank (p. 18), which is necessary in order to start the representation of the notebook. The following pages then feature a phrase each in the middle of the page, surrounded by empty space. The phrases are “I want two rolls” (EL&IC: 19), “And I wouldn’t say no to something sweet” (EL&IC: 20), “I’m sorry, this is the smallest I’ve got” (EL&IC: 21), “Start spreading the news . . .” (EL&IC: 22), “The regular, please” (EL&IC: 23), “Thank you, but I’m about to burst” (EL&IC: 24), “I’m not sure, but it’s late” (EL&IC: 25), “Help” (EL&IC: 26), and “Ha ha ha!” (EL&IC: 27). The reader is thus confronted by nine almost entirely empty pages. What is furthermore remarkable is that these pages, these ‘centred’ phrases, usually contain inanities, nothing of real significance, but merely phrases Thomas uses to get by in his daily life.

The resulting visual blanks are, however, by no means arbitrary or only serving an illustrating purpose of how Thomas manages his daily life. If this were the case, a simple explanation would do, or an illustration of one or two instances would clearly suffice to gain the picture. At this point of the novel, however, there are not one or two near empty pages, but a total of nine – and additionally, the same empty phrase pages are inserted again on various occasions throughout the novel. This suggests that the visual blanks serve another purpose than the one of mere illustration. Indeed, the visual blanks are significant as they foreground the general absence pervading Thomas’ life, as well as the iconically illustrate the isolation felt by Thomas.

Unable to speak, Thomas has only limited space available to express himself. It is remarkable that he would choose phrases that are rather specific and not generally applicable, while at the same time unimportant in the terms of (philosophical) meaning. The choice of phrases to fill the emptiness of the page reflects Thomas’ unwillingness – or incapability – to
truly express himself. He is no longer capable of deep emotion as he is too scared to commit to anything that could result in hurt and loss. Therefore he chooses daily phrases which are highly specific, as they allow him to ‘cop out’ of conversations that are potentially more meaningful and dangerous. As he describes in his letter, oftentimes Thomas points at a phrase that appears to be closest to his meaning; so he might answer when prompted about how he is feeling “[...]
the regular, please,” or perhaps “And I wouldn’t say no to something sweet,””, (EL&IC: 28). While it is certainly possible to read meaning into such ‘responses’, they nonetheless enable Thomas to hide behind the set phrases, as they cannot possibly contain his true feelings. Moreover, the use of set phrases as a means of communication – and phrases which are rather meaningless at that – clearly limit Thomas in his communication even more. Not only is he mute, but also incapable or unwilling to express anything deep or important by the use of his notebook. It can thus be said that Thomas deliberately limits his communication even more by putting a number of recyclable phrases on several pages in his book.

While Thomas might use the phrases to hide behind them, the phrases at the same time also distance him from the world surrounding him. If we assume that the character, the personality of people is usually laid bare by what they relay to others, Thomas’ true personality becomes increasingly absent from the world (I mean to say that the world surrounding him cannot know him, not that the reader does not get a clear picture about Thomas as the letters truly aid to characterise him in the course of the novel). The small, empty phrase at the centre of the page then becomes the small fragment of Thomas which is available to the world. This fragment, however, is surrounded by a vast visual emptiness. This emptiness on the one hand signifies Thomas’ distance from the world, but conversely also shows Thomas (in form of what he can utter, the set phrase on the page) in the middle of visual absence, which clearly foregrounds the isolation he both feels and enables. The visual blanks in Thomas’ notebook thus become an icon for the absences and losses that surround him as a person, as well as his attempts to put distance between himself and everything that might induce strong emotion. Thomas’ isolation becomes thus at the same time visualised and loaded with meaning as it recalls the story of his losses.

It is furthermore important to remark that some of the phrases deviate from the pattern outlined above. The first is “Help” (EL&IC: 26), the second “Ha ha ha!” (EL&IC: 27). Would the “Help” phrase be rendered as a usual means of daily communication, it would be more specific, just like the other phrases in the notebook, and read, for instance, like ‘Can you help me, please?’”. The choice of using “Help”, a single an isolated request for help,
signifies how lost Thomas is within the world, how desperate he is to move out of his state of misery, but at the same time – surrounded by metaphoric as well as iconic emptiness – he is isolated in the middle of the page where he can neither break free himself, nor accept help as he is distanced too far from every possible aiding hand. The “Ha ha ha” phrase is, in a different way, particularly striking as it points at yet another loss, namely the entire loss of joy and humour. Laughing is nothing that needs to be verbalised, it is something that can be fully expressed by sounds alone, or even a gesture like a smile. Instead of laughing, however, Thomas flips through his book and points at “Ha ha ha!” whenever he feels the need to be humorous. This, however, clearly emphasises the fact that Thomas truly does not feel like laughing, but instead needs to point at a written emblem of the action in order to even react on a joyful, humorous occasion.

The loss of laughter alongside the loss of speech points towards strong feelings of emptiness that must be felt by Thomas. The absence is, however, twofold: on the one hand, Thomas suffers from the absence, be it the absence of speech, the absence of love, the absence of hope or joy. On the other hand, absence and isolation is also something that seems to protect Thomas, at least this is what he experiences: if he puts absence between himself and anything substantial and meaningful, the hurt cannot be deepened. Emptiness, therefore, appears as both (false) saviour and cruel oppressor.

Both of the grandparents, Thomas in particular, appear to feel the need to hide behind absence, to cloak themselves in nothingness on occasion in order to lock out the world or the possibility of renewed hurt. After their marriage – as noted already not truly a marriage of love but rather an attempt to feel less lonely and lost in the world -- the couple begins to mark ‘nothing zones’ in their apartment. These nothing spaces are spaces where one can enter and cease to exist. If, for example, one of the partners undressed in a nothing zone, the other partner would fail to notice the nudity whereas in a something space, it would be remarked upon. Items left behind in a nothing space are also irretrievable as they cease to exist within the couple’s rule set. Over time, the limited number of nothing spots increases, until it encompasses entire rooms. Pointing at spots the couple decides what is something and what is nothing:

We took the blueprint of our apartment from the hallway closet and taped it to the inside of the front door, with an orange and a green marker we separated Something from Nothing. “This is Something,” we decided. “This is Nothing.” “Something.” “Something.” “Nothing.” (EL&IC: 111).
Whereas both partners seem to believe that their nothing spots serve as a refuge from the world, however, the spots also isolate them not only from the world but also from each other. Moreover, the something places seem to be rather void of meaning as well. Thus, they sometimes forget that they are in a something zone, and Thomas is actually surprised when he is “stranded” (EL&IC: 111) on a something spot. Being stranded on a something spot means, once more, that Thomas is not truly capable of living a meaningful life: he is isolated and ‘stranded’ in his life, stranded on an island of something in an encompassing sea of nothingness.

Stranded in the same sea of nothingness – and for very similar reasons – is also Oskar’s grandmother. Her letters to Oskar are, at first, filled with emptiness in the form of deliberate, persistent visual, non-supplemented blanks. Her letters include additional spaces between her sentences which result in visual and at first glance inexplicable blanks:

Dear Oskar,
I am writing this to you from the airport.
I have so much to say to you. I want to begin at the beginning, because that is what you deserve. I want to tell you everything, without leaving out a single detail. But where is the beginning? And what is everything? (EL&IC: 75).

This consistent use of extra spaces in the grandmother’s letters almost immediately marks them as hers, and thus certainly aids the reader in understanding who is talking, therefore avoiding unnecessary confusion of the narrative voices. Additionally, however, the visual blanks are signifying in various ways. Firstly, as can be seen in the above passage, they iconically express the grandmother’s hesitance to write. Having remained silent for years and years, she has finally decided to write the letter to Oscar and tell her story, words do not come easily, which is made visible by the use of visual blanks. Secondly, the visual blanks can signify open questions, such as ‘where to even begin?’, ‘what is the beginning?’, or ‘what is everything?’. These questions are, of course, not easily answerable as they are of a rather profound philosophical manner – the visual blanks, then, can symbolise ‘thinking gaps’, short spans of time dedicated to finding an answer which does not come. Lastly, the blanks also stem from a feeling that the grandmother does not have anything valuable to say at all. Just like Thomas, she has lost everything, and these feelings of loss threaten to spill over her entire life, erasing all that might be there into oblivion.
This feeling of being inadequate, of not having a story to tell is clearly reflected in the grandmother’s life story which Thomas asks her to write. It is, indeed, reproduced in the novel and consists of several blank pages (EL&IC: 121-123). This of course results in a huge visual, non-supplemented blank which iconically signifies the arguable absence of a story to tell. This emptiness is also later acknowledged by the grandmother: “I went into the guest room and pretended to write. I hit the space bar again and again and again. My life story was spaces.” (EC&IC: 176). Thus, the grandmother’s life story, pretended to be written in the guest room which is significantly a nothing zone and does, therefore, not exist in the rule-set of the couple, thus is only one big blank. There is nothing to be told, and indeed nothing is told. This nothing, this total negation of having lived a life – even if it was a life filled with loss – is, however, greatly unsettling not only to the reader but also to the other protagonists of the story. Thus, Thomas – distanced and never truly emotionally involved, attempts to protect his wife by pretending to read the empty pages and telling her how much he appreciates them, all the while encouraging her to continue ‘writing’. The grandmother continues to press the space key until she feels that her blank story is complete.

While this empty life-story, this inability to express or even acknowledge that there has been something in the past, might appear highly negative at first, it is important to note that both Oskar’s grandmother and grandfather to a certain extent redeem themselves from their oppressive silences. Thomas, although remaining mute, writes letters to his son which he never sends, but also experiences a sort of salvation as he meets Oskar, his grandson, and begins to form a careful bond with him. The grandmother’s approach to ending the silence and realising that not all is loss and emptiness is, however, much more straight-forward. Firstly, she decides to figuratively fill her inner emptiness with a child (Oskar’s father):

One morning I awoke and understood the hole in the middle of me. I realised that I could compromise my life, but not life after me. I couldn’t explain it. The need came before explanations.” (EL&IC: 177)

This she writes in one of her letters and thus acknowledges that even though the past might be lost, the future is not. She also realises that having a child, focussing on the future rather than living in a terrible past, might fill her inner emptiness, and indeed giving birth to a child – and later, watching Oskar, her grandson, grow up – gives her a certain amount of joy and fills her empty life with love, even though Thomas leaves her as he finds out that she is pregnant. In a way, filling the blank with a child opens up the possibility to reach out to
somebody, to fill the empty pages of her autobiography with a story – simply because now there is somebody who the story can be addressed to. This is the second realisation: there is a story to be told, and it is a story that does not consist of blanks alone. This is why the grandmother tells Oskar that she wants to tell him everything, and even though the earlier letters are filled with the visual blanks expressing hesitation and emptiness as outlined above, her discourse becomes more and more urgent as her story proceeds. This is signified by a decrease in visual blanks. Instead of using normal paragraphs riddled by extra spaces, the grandmother begins to type out single sentences before switching to the next line. This, on the one hand, does not compromise the clarity of who is speaking as the typeset remains typical, and on the other hand also reduces the feeling of hesitance and emptiness and replaces it by a more rapid, urgent flow of words:

When the pages are in the typewriter, I can’t see his [Thomas’] face.  
In that way I am choosing you over him.  
I don’t need to see him.  
I don’t need to know if he is looking up at me.  
It’s not even that I trust him not to leave.  
I know this won’t last.  
I’d rather be me than him.  
The words are coming so easily.  
The pages are coming so easily. (EL&IC: 313)

While it could be argued that starting every sentence in a new line is also creating visual blanks, the resulting blanks are not meaningful but rather a necessary by-product. Each line can be read as a new thought, and thus as a new paragraph as each new thought would necessitate starting a new paragraph. Additionally, unlike the extra spaces used earlier in the grandmother’s letters, the technique of having sentences follow each other starting in a new line also gives a sense of (almost poetic) immediacy: the thoughts come too fast to be structured, they are simply put on the page as they come, they are verbalised just the way they are and in no way altered. Eventually, the grandmother has truly found her voice: she no longer is silent but keeps writing, for the words and pages now come easily, and are filled with meaning instead of (visual) blanks.

In conclusion it can thus be said that Foer’s Extremely Loud & Impossibly Close is a novel that utilises non-supplemented visual blanks frequently. The visual blanks underline feelings of loss and absence, but also iconically express the state of being muted and stuck in an oppressively silent past. The reduction and replacement of visual blanks in the
grandmother’s case co-occurs with the grandmother’s understanding that she has a story to tell, and also that her life is not as empty as she might have felt before. Therefore, also the absence of visual blanks is signifying in that a decrease in visual blanks also signifies a decrease in the absences tied to the protagonists. Visual blanks, thus, play a vital role in the novel as a means of foregrounding absence, expressing loss and absence more tangibly for the audience, but also in marking the distinction between presence and absence. For this reason, the novel should clearly not be read without paying attention to the visual absences on the level of discourse, as they are clearly signifying and contributing to the overall effect of the text.

5.1.3. Visual, non-supplemented Blanks in Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*

It is remarkable that Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, written as early as the middle of the 18th century, is incredibly rich in the usage of experimental devices. Therefore, a great number of dashes, asterisks, and similar means are used throughout the novel. Additionally, the novel clearly foregrounds its own fictionality; it is in this way a meta-novel thematising novel writing and its difficulties.

These features of *Tristram Shandy* have been extensively discussed by various authors and are only partly relevant to my purposes. Suffice it to say at this point that *Tristram Shandy* is a highly multi-faceted novel introducing various themes, while being highly conscious of its own discourse and fictionality.

*Tristram Shandy* is, however, also a novel in which absences loom large. These absences occur mostly in the form of visual blanks – non-supplemented ones in the form of empty pages, and supplemented ones in the form of asterisks and dashes – all of which shall be discussed shortly. Before we can launch into a closer reading of significant ‘absence’ passages, however, it is at first necessary to point out that absences in other forms than visual blanks are also present in the novel.

Firstly, the whole novel is missing a vital part: judging from the full title, *The Life and Opinions of TRISTRAM SHANDY, Gentleman*, the reader is rightly expecting an autobiography. While the novel, at least on the surface, claims to be such an autobiography, the actual vita is conspicuously limited and for the most part absent. Thus, all that is learned about Tristram Shandy, autobiographer, is the surrounding circumstances of the protagonist’s
birth and (mis-)christening, until Tristram makes his final appearance at the age of 5. It becomes immediately obvious that an autobiography spanning the time from before birth until the age of 5 is unusual to say the very least. Clearly, this ‘autobiography’ is not an autobiography in the common sense: the autobiographical part of the novel is, for the most part, absent.

What is offered to the reader instead are seemingly endless digressions that delay the flow of information or halt it altogether. The novel claims that the digressions are necessary in order to create a framework that enables the reader to understand the motivation of characters as well as the general events of the novel, which is, of course, not true. Instead, the digressions foreground the metafictional theme of the novel, namely the difficulty of writing an autobiography (or novel) that causally explains everything. The digressions, in this way, mask the absence of a real autobiographical discourse to a certain extent and, as a matter of fact, replace it.

Secondly, it must be noted that even within the digressions or the sparse parts that are actually autobiographical, there are absences in the form of Leerstellen. Therefore, often vital information is only hinted at or entirely left out. For instance is Tristram’s birth – which leads to his flattened nose – only very vaguely described. Similarly, the event of Tristram’s christening is not entirely clear: Yorick, who could have averted the mis-christening, is for reasons that are never disclosed to the reader, absent. These Leerstellen of course enhance the reader’s imagination and are thus certainly an element contributing to the immersion as well as suspense of the novel.

Thirdly, there is also an absence in the form of the novel. *Tristram Shandy* is telling a story that is far from classical in its form, as it does not have a beginning, a middle, and an ending. This lack of conventional form is certainly a deliberate deviation thereof, which once more foregrounds the fictionality of the novel and lays bare the constructedness of the discourse.

The absences described above therefore serve the simple, yet certainly important purposes of contributing to and enhancing the metafictional theme of the novel, as well as to activate the reader’s imagination and curiosity, which is perhaps a necessary move designed to keep the reader interested in the novel and increase the willingness to read through the many digressions. In summary, these absences are pervading the novel and present at all times, albeit they may not be foregrounded or noticed consistently.
Besides these more general absences, *Tristram Shandy* also features a great number of visual blanks. As this chapter is still concerned with non-supplemented, visual blanks let us now direct our attention at the instances of these non-supplemented visual blanks in *Tristram Shandy*.

The first and maybe most striking instance of a non-supplemented visual blank is the frequently quoted blank page. This blank page is inserted to allow the reader to paint their own picture of the widow Wadman and is preambled the following way: “Sit down, Sir, paint her [the widow] to your own mind – as like your mistress as you can – as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you – ‘tis all one to me – please but your own fancy in it.” (*TS*: 325). After this prompt, the following page is completely left blank. This visual blank, however, does not serve the same function as the empty pages in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* did. Whereas the empty pages in Foer’s novel were born out of a feeling that there is no story to be told, that there is nothing to be related, the empty page in *Tristram Shandy* is clearly a space intentionally left blank. The page is meant, on the one hand, to allow the reader to paint their own picture of the widow Wadman – not only mentally, but also actively on the blank page. This, of course, enhances the reader activation and participation greatly. In order to “conceive this right [...]” (*TS*: 325) the reader must put the own imagination to the test and paint a most colourful and beautiful widow Wadman by this means.

The fact that the actual description of the widow is left out has two effects. Firstly, it creates a certain disruption in the aesthetic illusion as it foregrounds the process of creation as the widow is described, this time not by the narrating instance but rather by the reader himself. Secondly, it might have a contrary effect and actually deepen the immersion as the blank page asks the reader to ‘fill in the blank’: the widow Wadman might be too beautiful, too charming to be described in words. This prepares a function of allowing the reader to paint a most tempting picture that is disclosed immediately after the blank page: “—Was there ever anything in Nature so sweet! – so exquisite! / -- Then, dear Sir, how could my uncle Toby resist it?” (*TS*: 327). In this way, the narrator provides a tentative moral justification for Uncle Toby having an affair: the widow Wadman is simply too tempting to be resisted, and as the reader is put into the position of painting a similarly desirable image – an image he might not be able to resist – he is put into Toby’s shoes. Even if this empathising with Toby’s desire does not provide a clear and irrefutable justification for the budding affair, it nonetheless directs the sympathies – and in this case also empathies – towards Toby.
The blank page and the surrounding passages clearly emphasise a dichotomy that is central to *Tristram Shandy*: on the one hand, the aesthetic illusion is enhanced, and on the other it is disrupted and the fictionality of the story is laid bare. It is important to note that, unlike in typically post-modern novels, the foregrounding of the constructedness of the fiction always remains playful and humorous. Whereas in post-modern novels the laying bare of fictionality has usually a more deconstructing function, the connotations of *Tristram Shandy* are by far not as negative but rather a jesting examination of the metafictional theme central to the novel. Therefore, fictionality is laid bare, the aesthetic illusion is disrupted or broken – but it is also, on the other hand enhanced. For this reason it would be wrong to read metafictional implications in *Tristram Shandy* as entirely destructive elements, which should be kept in mind during my further discussion.

A similar metafictional function of non-supplemented visual blanks can be described in the case of the missing chapters. Throughout the novel, several chapters are missing, the first of which is chapter 24 of book 4. This absent chapter is not visually marked: after chapter 23, without any additional gaps or markings, simply follows chapter 25. This fact might be easily missed would not chapter 25 remark clearly on the missing chapter:

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-- No doubt, Sir – there is a whole chapter wanting here – and a chasm of ten pages made in the book by it – but the book-binder is neither a fool, nor a knave, or a puppy – nor is the book a jot more imperfect (at least upon that score) – but, on the contrary, the book is more perfect and complete by wanting the chapter, than having it, as I shall demonstrate to your reverences in this manner. (TS: 207).
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Thus it is made clear that the missing chapter is intentional and not an oversight or printing error, which, of course, foregrounds the convention that chapters are subsequently numbered. The fact that the chapter is missing, that it is left blank rather than removed in a way as to not allow the reader to know that it has ever been there (by that I mean, to simply call chapter 25 chapter 24, and keep the sequence) foregrounds the fact that chapters are something that is fictional rather than something that is natural. The missing chapter also has the function of enhancing and activating the imagination of the reader. Indeed, the absence of content makes us wonder what the chapter might have contained. The narrator’s brief explanation as to what the chapter would have contained is unsatisfying – our mind immediately begins to work at filling in the gap, even though the “book is more perfect and complete by wanting the chapter” *(TS: 207).* This, of course, is an instance of the humorous and playful foregrounding of the discourse in the novel: it is unlikely for a novel to be more
complete if it is missing chapters. On the other hand, this humorous remark also includes a certain criticism of style: the many, many digression – of course used intentionally throughout the novel – are not necessarily fit for a great story, thus a story could be more perfect without them.

The foregrounding of the fact that a chapter is missing and the following explanation regarding the reason is also preparing the missing chapters later in the novel. In book 9, two chapters are missing, namely chapter 18 and 19 (TS: 435-36). Unlike the missing chapter described above, these two chapters are actually visually foregrounded and cannot possibly be missed. Chapter 18 is filled with about half a page of empty space and a whole blank page is dedicated to chapter 19. These non-supplemented, visual blanks clearly serve the purpose of activating the reader’s imagination while, as before, at the same time foregrounding the discourse. The empty pages invite the reader to fill in the blank – an endeavour that is entirely impossible as there are no pointers or possible explanations given. Nonetheless, the fact that there are visually blank spaces labelled chapters suggests that there must be some content, something to fill the blank with. This, clearly, makes the reader reflect on what the content might be. This clearly enhances the reader’s imagination, but at the same time also allows for ponderings regarding the constructedness of the novel.

The last instance of non-supplemented visual blanks in *Tristram Shandy* occurs in book three, chapter 11. In this chapter, the excommunication text – curiously in the possession of Tristram’s father, is reproduced on the left page, whereas it is rephrased, translated and ‘narrated’ simultaneously on the right. The two texts, Latin original and paraphrase can of course not be read simultaneously. What is remarkable and almost instantly obvious is that in the Latin original on the left there are partly very large gaps that do not seem to have a logical explanation, at least not in the context of the Latin excommunication text. The seemingly unmotivated visual blanks become explicable, however, once the translation/narration is perused. The gaps result from the narrations and digressions that have nothing to do with the text that is being read. This, consequently, takes up a whole lot more space than the original text or any translation thereof would. The translation coincides with the Latin text, thus creating huge gaps on the left page. The visual blanks here become a sort of placeholder for the digressions so central to the novel and, to a certain amount, foreground the fact that they are not essential to the meaning per se, which is why they leave behind blanks in a concise text as the one reproduced in the chapter.
In summary it can thus be said that *Tristram Shandy* truly exploits non-supplemented visual blanks in order to lay bare fictionality in a playful manner, but also to activate the reader’s imagination by extending an invitation to fill in the visual as well as semantic blanks. In that way, the novel retains a certain balance between fiction disrupting and illusion enhancing non-supplemented visual blanks, which makes the laying bare of fictionality a jocund game rather than a destructive device.

As might have been already visible in the examples above, *Tristram Shandy* is, however, not only a novel rich in non-supplemented blanks, but also one sporting a great number of supplemented visual blanks in the form of mainly dashes and asterisks. Indeed, the dashes are so omnipresent in the novel that it is impossible to discuss them all – particularly as the functions are similar – so I will have to content myself with examining only a few interesting passages which shall be done in the following.

**5.2. Supplemented Visual Blank**

**5.2.1. Supplemented Visual Blanks in Sterne, *Tristram Shandy***

As has already been mentioned, *Tristram Shandy* is incredibly rich in supplemented visual blanks. What is perhaps most immanently striking to the reader is the overabundance of dashes used in the novel. Not only is the dash the favoured marker of speech, it also occurs copiously within the narrative itself – even at times where it is not needed for correctness, as dashes frequently co-occur with other punctuation marks such as exclamation marks or semi-colons. We can of course safely presume that Sterne did know proper punctuation and that therefore the dashes are not arbitrary, but rather imbued with meaning or a certain function. Indeed, the dashes which occur regularly within the narrative do render the discourse more immediate and colloquial on the one hand, but also foreground the discourse per se by the overabundant and definitely unusual use of dashes. Let us take a look at the following passage, in which Tristram relates facts about his Uncle Toby:

My uncle Toby was a man patient of injuries; -- not from want of courage, -- I have told you in a former chapter, ‘that he was a man of courage’: -- And will add here,
that where just occasions presented, or called it forth, -- I know no man under whose arm I would have sooner taken shelter; -- nor did this arise from any insensibility or obtuseness of his intellectual parts; -- for he felt this insult of my father’s as feelingly as a man could do; -- but he was of a peaceful, placid nature, -- no jarring element in it, -- all was mixed up so kindly within him; my uncle Toby had scarce a heart to retaliate upon a fly. (TS: 76).

This relatively short passage features eight dashes in total, all of which co-occur with other punctuation marks (commas, semi-colons, colons) and which are, therefore, grammatically superfluous. The result is one long sentence consisting of several lines which is only organised by punctuation marks. It can thus be said that the style of writing – long sentences including jumping thoughts and digressions from the actual topic at hand – is a necessary structuring element. The function of the dashes, however, goes far beyond that. Indeed the dashes in this passage (as well as many, many others) clearly are functional visual blanks: they create a new cognitive slot into which the new thought or digression can be entered. In this way, the dash signifies the brief moment of thought, or the taking a breath that precedes new information. What results is then not a traditional narration, but rather a chain of association divided by visual, supplemented blanks which mirror the moment that is necessary to form the next link of the chain, but also and maybe more significantly, mimic the rhythm of speech that would likely be adopted when orally relating the information above.

It becomes thus clear that the dashes serve the purpose of rendering the discourse more colloquial. Tristram as a narrator writes as he would speak. This is supported by the fact that the narrator not only addresses the reader directly, but also remarks that he has “told” – and not written – that Toby is a courageous man in a previous chapter already. The connection between dash and spoken language becomes even more immanent if we investigate how speech is rendered in the novel:

[Toby, a fly in his hand] – I’ll not hurt a hair of thy head: -- Go, says he, lifting up the sash, and opening his hand as he spoke, to let it escape; -- go, poor devil, get thee gone, why should I hurt thee? – This world surely is wide enough to hold both thee and me. (TS: 76)

It is of course possible to distinguish this spoken language from the narrative proper by the marker “says he”, but nonetheless spoken language is rendered in the same way than the narrative passage described above, which clearly strengthens the link between the dash as a
marker of colloquial rather than written language. While this closeness to colloquial language in the narrative proper, however, enhances immediacy and the aesthetic illusion by allowing the narrator to ‘speak’ directly to the reader, the unusualness of the discourse – namely the abundance of dashes – foregrounds it, and thus directs the reader’s attention to the constructedness of the text. This effect is additionally enhanced by the mentioning of a “former chapter”, which forces the reader to recollect that he is not conversing with Tristram, but rather reading an ‘autobiography’. Thus, the same tendency of both enhancing and disrupting the aesthetic illusion that has been already described in the previous chapter, remains.

In order to illustrate the connection between dash as a placeholder for pauses in either thinking or speech – adding a new association either mentally or verbally – I have opted for only the above example, which is an arbitrary one. It would be an impossible task to describe every instance of dashes used in the above way, as the device is truly used consistently throughout the novel.

Dashes in Tristram Shandy are, however, not always straight-forward, common dashes but can also vary in length. Longer than usual dashes occurs, for example, if they are placeholders for something that is not said, for instance in the following passage:

[the father leans forward and listens] as my uncle Toby hummed over the letter.
----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- he’s gone! said my uncle Toby. (TS: 242)

The letter informs Toby of the death of Tristram’s brother. What is most striking is, however, the use of long dashes as Toby hums over the letter. As Martina Michelsen (1993: 191ff.) rightly argues, the reader is already informed about the brother’s death at the beginning of the chapter. The passage then, in logical consequence, is not meant to relate the news of the death, at least not predominantly, but also includes additional information which is encoded in the visual blanks. Firstly, the visual blanks mark the actual content of the letter. Secondly, and more importantly, they also reflect the reading process iconically. The dashes thus stand for the portion of text that is perused at the moment, the gaps in between reflect the natural reading rhythm. What the reader is confronted with is then not the content of the letter, but the way the letter is being read. Additionally, as it becomes obvious upon closer inspection of the dashes, the spaces in between the dashes in the second line are smaller than
in the first and last line. This reflects that Toby, at first, starts reading at a normal speed and then, upon discovering the bad news, begins to read more rapidly, soaking in information, and finally slowing down again as the bad news sink in again. What is established then is an iconic rendering – and making visible – of the reading process. Therefore, not the content of the letter is foregrounded, but the way the letter is read, which is yet another metareferential gesture in a highly metareferential novel.

Whereas, as has been established in the example above, dashes of various length and spacing are used as placeholders of content, asterisks can also be used as similar placeholders. The use of asterisks, however, differs from the use of dashes in that far as asterisks are used as placeholders if it would not be appropriate to disclose the content of the passage to the reader, for instance because it contains a swear word or circumstances that include taboos. This can, for instance, be seen in the event of Tristram’s accidental circumcision. The event begins with an oversight – Susannah has forgotten to put the chamber pot (already replaced with ******* *** in the novel) in Tristram’s room. What happens next is left to the reader’s imagination:

[Tristram stating that Dr. Slop made more out of the event than was necessary] so that in a week’s time, or less, it was in everybody’s mouth, That poor Master Shandy entirely;--but that ******* ***’s also’ (TS: 300)

This ‘veiling’ of the events by the use of asterisks of course greatly enhances the reader’s imagination. By what little is related, however, it possible to fill in the events that have taken place: Susannah has forgotten the chamber pot, therefore Tristram decides to relief his urges out of the nursery window, which unfortunately crashes down – which luckily leads not to an entire castration, but an accidental circumcision, as Tristram insists that the injury was not bad and that Dr. Slop made more out of it than was really the case. Thus the asterisks invite the reader to fill in the gaps by utilising the own imagination. As much as the asterisks veil the events and enhance the reader’s imagination, they at the same time also direct the imagination into the right direction. It is not too hard to guess the word chamber pot from the context and the fact that every asterisk (******* ***) replaces a letter of the word further aids the reception process. Additionally, the few words thrown into the passage above enable the reader to make sense of the window accident. Thus, the reader is greatly activated and
prompted to become co-author of the text, which is remarkable for a novel written as early as *Tristram Shandy*.

Similar tactics are employed in a passage where a conversation between the widow Wadman and uncle Toby takes place at the beginning of chapter 20 in book nine:

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--You shall see the very place, Madam; said my uncle Toby.
Mrs Wadman blushed – looked towards the door – turned pale – blushed slightly again – recovered her natural colour – blushed worse than ever; which, for the sake of the unlearned reader, I translate thus –
‘L—d! I cannot look at it –
What would the world say if I looked at it?
I should drop down, if I looked at it –
I wish I could look at it –
There can be no sin in looking at it.
--I will look at it.’ (*TS*: 436).
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This passage is remarkable in multiple ways. Firstly it shall be noted that it directly follows the empty chapters which I have described in the according chapter on non-supplemented visual blanks. This means that preceding this passage, which curiously starts with asterisks instead of tangible information, there is already something absent. This absence of the blank chapters then ‘spills over’ into the beginning of chapter 20 but moves from non-supplemented to supplemented visual blank.

Secondly, as opposed to the passage relating the events surrounding the nursery accident, it becomes clear that the asterisks here do not mark a series of events or improper words, but are actually speech and therefore part of the conversation to follow. This conclusion can be easily drawn by the dashes that precede the lines of asterisks, which are the usual speech markers of the novel. Additionally, it is reflected in the fact that the second line of asterisks is shorter than the others (thus mirroring a short line of speech), and that the last line of asterisks ends rather abruptly, followed by a new line of speech. The dash which follows the last asterisk suggests either a pause before the next turn is taken, perhaps needed to reflect upon what has been said (which is, as it is masked by asterisks, probably something of a racy nature), or that the speech has been cut short, which seems unlikely due to the fact that a full stop is used after the last asterisk.
The content of the speech is, once more, left to the reader’s imagination and clearly activates the same. It can, however, be reconstructed by applying some background knowledge to the passage. Uncle Toby and widow Wadman are arriving at Toby’s estate and looking at it. Directly following the asterisks Toby remarks that the widow shall “see the very place”. Widow Wadman’s reaction to this disclosure appears to be inappropriate at first glance. From the context it becomes clear, however, that the place that is being talked about is not the estate, but rather Toby’s loins, as widow Wadman is concerned that his groin injury might have had undesirable results. The content of the ‘asterisk speech’ then likely veils an explanation or request regarding Toby’s masculinity – in the sense of a classical turn-taking it would be most likely widow Wadman speaking, but it is not possible to tell with absolute certainty. Widow Wadman does not react to the sight of the estate, but rather to the possible sight of Toby’s genitalia, which is, of course, an improper thing to do for a lady.

What is furthermore remarkable is that the passage not only veils the gaudy details of the conversation, but that widow Wadman reacts in a non-verbal manner. She, in a way, supplements the aural blank resulting from her silence and physical reaction to this prospect with gestures and blushing. As this reaction might not be entirely clear to the “unlearned reader” the narrator then “translate[s]” her reaction, and thus supplies the reader with vital clues about the content of the asterisk passage. The translation, significantly, also includes dashes which cut the phrases short, and therefore mark the train of thought that might be going through the widow’s mind, her argumentation to reach the resolve to “look at it”.

It can thus be said that the use of asterisks does not only bracket what cannot be said directly – morally fallible passages, swear words and the like – but also activate the reader’s imagination, while at the same time providing enough clues to actually re-construct the events. The use of asterisks then enables the inclusion of racy detail without actually spelling them out. Just like the painting of the tempting widow Wadman was entirely left to the reader’s imagination, the more gaudy details of the story need to be reconstructed by the reader as well. Thus, content that is not morally impeccable or could be criticised by contemporaries, can be blamed on the reader’s ‘dirty imagination’ and therefore allows for a safe inclusion of content that might be taboo.

In conclusion it has thus been seen that Tristram Shandy is indeed a novel that utilises meaningful visual blanks, both non-supplemented and supplemented, frequently and meaningfully. The blanks can and do activate the reader’s imagination, but also point towards
the constructedness of the discourse in a metareferential yet not destructive gesture. Additionally, visual blanks are used in order to render ‘reading acts’ iconically in that they reflect the rhythm of reading. In summary, it is not least this deliberate application of absences to the novel that renders it the masterpiece it is.

5.2.2. Supplemented Visual Blanks in Poetry: Emily Dickinson, “I heard a Fly buzz”

It is perhaps common knowledge that Emily Dickinson’s poetry – although rather traditional in diction, meter and rhyme – is surprisingly Modernist and experimental with regards to the use of punctuation. Similarly to Sterne, Dickinson employs a great number of dashes in her poetry. While it is certainly true that often these dashes are used as a musical device – marking the ebb and flow of a certain phrase – these visual blanks frequently serve signifying functions. It would, therefore, be wrong to ‘transcribe’ Dickinson’s poetry into ‘proper’ punctuation as has been attempted in history (cf. Lindberg-Seyersted 1968: 189ff.). Such a transcription would, indeed, result in a grave loss of non-linguistic meaning. It is furthermore unlikely that the often iconic or otherwise signifying use of visual blanks is a mere coincidence, as it occurs not only frequently but also persistently in Dickinson’s poetry.

For the purpose of illustrating the signifying use of supplemented visual blanks in Emily Dickinsons poetry, I have opted to analyse one of her most famous poem, number 465 or “I heard a Fly buzz”. It shall be highlighted once more that this is by far not the only poem that utilises visual blanks in a meaningful way – an in depth analysis of the entirety of Dickinson’s poetry is, however, clearly beyond the scope of this paper, but would prove fruitful with regards to the analysis of visual blanks.

On the level of the enounced, “I heard a Fly buzz” is concerned with the death of the presumably female speaker who, before her sight fails and she dies, hears a fly buzz in the room. It can perhaps be best described as a ‘snapshot’ of the speaker’s death scene. Formally, the abundant use of dashes is striking. The dashes, on the one hand, mark the prosody of the verses, but on the other also include additional meaning. This already becomes evident in the first stanza:

“I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves of Storm—“ (ll. 1-4)
The visual blanks in this first stanza serve several purposes. In verse one, the two dashes on the one hand help to foreground the striking revelation of “when I died”, which transforms the mundane act of hearing a fly buzz into something more startling. The dashes in this way can be read as a auskomponierte Pause, adding a musical emphasis on the “when I died” phrase. Additionally, the first dash serves as a placeholder for the buzzing sound of the fly which invites the reader to ponder the atmosphere of the room for a moment, thus consequently activating the reader’s imagination. The second dash in the first verse then serves a similar purpose: it foreshadows and anticipates the stillness which will be the subject of the following verses. Foregrounding this stillness is also the purpose of the dash at the end of verse three: the stillness builds up from line two and climaxes in verse three, which is consequently followed by a dash which visualises the absence of sound in the room. Moreover, the dash – together with the dash at the end of line four – frames the last verse of the stanza. The stillness in the air is like the one “Between the Heaves of Storm” (l. 4). The framing of the dashes co-occurs with the absence and presence of sound, stillness and thunderous noise. Where there are words – “Between the Heaves of Storm” (l. 4), there is sound. Where there are visual blanks – the dashes – there is silence. Therefore, the dashes iconically represent the absence of sound by the use of visual blanks. These ‘absences’ frame the ‘presences’; the sound is truly “between” (l. 4) the silences. The last verses of the first stanza thus utilise visual blanks in order to represent the ebb and flow of silence and sound.

Visual blanks are similarly significant in the second stanza of the poem:

“The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—
And Breaths were gathering firm
For the last Onset—when the King
Be witnessed—in the Room—“ (ll.5-8)

The stanza is concerned with the last onset of breath, the figurative exhalation of life as the “King” – death – enters the room. Whereas the dashes in line five of the stanza seem to have a more framing function in that the ‘encircle’ the by now dry eyes around the speaker, the dashes in lines seven and eight interrupt the flow of the lines: the last onset of breath is thus rendered visually (or aurally, if the poem is read aloud) and splits the sentences into brief fragments which iconically mirror the shortness of breath as caused by the final onset of life before death.
Stanza three is then relatively uneventful in terms of visual blanks. The speakers possessions are “signed away” (l. 9), and as this uttering of the will is done suddenly “There interposed a Fly—“ (l. 12), thus ending the stanza with a visual blank. This visual blank on the one hand connects the stanza formally to the next, as there is a run-on-line between line 12 and 13, thus rendering the enjambement more readable as the dash suggests that the stanza is not finished with the stanza border. On the other hand, the dash also is an empty space to be filled by the reader’s imagination: the fly buzzing around, an actually rather mundane thing to be sure, gains a rather intangible significance throughout the poem. It appears that the fly is meant to help the speaker pass over from the world of the living into the world of death. It can be read as an animal ferryman shutting the curtain between life and death as the speaker fades away, as it intercepts the dying speaker’s sight and thus veils the world of the living. In this way, the dash foregrounds that the fly is not simply a fly, but rather something more which cannot be named or described, and can thus only be expressed non-linguistically by including an empty space, a visual, supplemented blank. Lastly, the visual blank in the poem can also be read to mirror the interception of the speaker’s sights: as the fly is placed between the speaker and her surroundings, the speaker is confronted with a ‘blank’ – she cannot see the circle of her loved ones any longer – which renders the visual blank as an iconic mirror of the ‘blank’ experienced by the speaker herself.

The last stanza of the poem is then once more incredibly rich in meaningful visual blanks:

“With Blue—uncertain—stumbling Buzz—
Between the light—and me—
And then the Windows failed—and then
I could not see to see—“ (ll. 13-16)

While here it can be argued that the fading breath of the speaker renders the prosody increasingly fragmented (which is a tendency that has been kept from stanza 2), the visual blanks in this stanza serve various other purposes as well. Line 13 describes the “uncertain” and “stumbling” movements of the fly. The dashes here than imitate the movement of the fly, which, just like the verse itself, is tentative and uncertain, adding just what is absolutely necessary. As has already been mentioned, the fly in line 14 continues to intercept the speaker’s sight. Here the dashes separate the speaker from both the light and the world of the living. “—and me---“ is isolated by the dashes, and the visual blanks signify the absence of light and life that is already surrounding the speaker. In line 15 the “Windows failed” – the
speaker’s eyes completely fail. This failure and the resulting darkness and inability to see is mimicked by the use of a dash: the visual blank in the verse line iconically mirrors the ‘visual blank’ that is at this time experienced by the speaker herself upon the failure of her eyesight. Finally, the speaker dies, which is expressed in line 16. “I could not see to see—”. Here it is remarkable that the poem does not end with a full stop (which would also point towards the finality of death), but rather ends with a dash. This is very similar to ending a poem with a question mark: the poem is not led to a conclusion. On the contrary, an open question remains: as the speaker dies, it is not the absolute and irrevocable end (as the poem does not end in the sense of a full stop) – there is something that must come after the dash. The dash, therefore, points towards an afterlife, towards the unknown which follows death. On the other hand, the use of a visual blank at the end of the poem also signifies that what might come after death is a ‘blank’, it is unknown and impossible to describe. Therefore, whatever the speaker might or might not see is veiled from the reader’s eyes by the use of a final visual blank, which once more invites the reader to utilise the own imagination, or at the very least confront the central question of what follows death.

It has thus become evident that Emily Dickinson utilises visual blanks in the form of dashes not only as a method of rendering the prosody and musicality of the lines, but also as a means of including an additional, non-verbal layer of meaning. This layer of meaning is concerned with thoughts of an afterlife and the necessarily open question of whether or not there is life after death, and if so what it might look like. Additionally, verbal meaning is emphasised by ‘visualising’ states of separation or changes of sound and silence. It is therefore clear that it would be a grave mistake to attribute the use of dashes in this poem to a lack of education on Dickinson’s side, as truly the various blanks and absences are meaningful and greatly contribute to the poem as a whole.

6. Conclusion

It has thus become evident that literary absences are not only frequent in literature, but can also be signifying and can, therefore, contribute greatly to the overall meaning and effect of a text. It has been shown that the three main forms of literary absences – semantic, aural and visual blanks – occur in texts of various epochs and genres. Whereas some forms of
literary discourse lend themselves more willingly to a certain form of blank – for instance, aural blanks can be most easily applied to performed drama or poetry – it is nonetheless possible to find examples of each of the main three forms of blanks in poetry, prose and drama respectively.

It has furthermore become obvious that the presence of signifying literary absences is not dependant on a certain cultural-historical epoch. On the contrary, blanks of the various kinds can be found from as early as Shakespeare’s work to contemporary novels. As it was not the aim of this thesis to investigate a possible connection between the density of literary blanks and cultural-historical epoch, the historical implications of absences in literature have been ignored. It would be interesting, in a further step, to investigate the presence of absences in literature in different cultural-historical periods. As a first step into the sparsely investigated field of literary absences, however, suffice it to say that a systematic framework with regards to the analysis of literary absences could be established and that the emphasis on describing what is absent rather than present has been proven to be a fruitful endeavour.

Indeed, literary absences in their main forms can and do add extra meaning to a text. The same applies to possible functions, which range from reader activation and enhancement of the reader’s imagination and suspense, over the building of iconic mirrors for a thematic absence in the text, to highly specific and interesting functions. This could be seen clearly in the examples discussed in the course of this paper.

Firstly, semantic blanks – or Leerstellen – were investigated. Hardy’s novel *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* provided an example of a classical Leerstelle as described by Iser, which became more complex and even iconic upon closer inspection. Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* as well as Joyce’s *Portrait* then illustrated semantic blanks created by a limited narration, a handicapped narrator in the first and a child-narrator in the second example. Semantic blanks were furthermore described in poetry, namely Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” and Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. In addition to the more classical functions of enhancing both the experientiality as well as activating the reader’s imagination, both poems also introduced a metareferential function present, asides the obvious topics of the respective poem, also in the semantic blanks of the poems. Finally, Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* served as an example for semantic blanks in drama and concluded the chapter on semantic blanks.

Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*, however, did not only prove to be rich in semantic blanks but also in aural blanks and was thus revisited in the chapter on aural blanks, where it turned
out that the function of pauses in the play aided the characterisation of the protagonists. Whereas Pinter’s play described characters by something not tangibly present in the performance, Beckett’s plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* primarily utilised aural blanks in order to emphasise a general and overwhelming presence of nothingness. A similar emphasis on absence could be seen in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, where hypocatalectic verses are utilised in order to iconically foreground central absences, such as death or loss.

Finally, non-supplemented visual blanks were outlined. Here, two visual and highly iconic poems written by George Herbert showed that the visual shape of a poem, as well as the resulting absences surrounding a verse, can be highly meaningful. Similarly meaningful visual blanks were described in prose, namely Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Supplemented visual blanks were described in *Tristram Shandy* and Emily Dickinson’s poem “I heard a Fly buzz”. Generally, the description of visual blanks was proven to be a fruitful endeavour as in none of the given examples the visual blanks were arbitrary or meaningless.

It has thus become evident that literary absences can be highly signifying and meaningful participants of a text. Literary absences can be systematically classified and described, which is what has been attempted in this paper. Moreover, the theoretical framework described at the very beginning of this paper, can clearly and easily be supported by the analysis of examples from various cultural-historical epochs and various genres. The functions of signifying literary blanks can vary, but they are always important in that they contribute greatly to the overall effect and aesthetics of the text at hand. In conclusion, it has been shown that literary absences are meaningful and important contributors to a text and should, therefore, not be ignored or discarded in a detailed literary analysis. Hitherto neglected as a deliberate form of creating meaning in a text, the various forms of literary absences should be treated with increased awareness and similarly to literary presences. This paper has hopefully managed to raise this awareness towards literary absences in that it laid bare that absences, even though invisible on the page or in the performance, are meaningful and important participants of the text which, without a doubt, can contribute greatly to the overall effect and aesthetics of poetry, drama and prose.
Bibliography

Primary Literature:


Secondary Literature:


