The Sound Of Silence – Simon & Garfunkel – Notes

- **Activity types:** Matching descriptions to lyrics
- **Level:** Intermediate/Upper-Intermediate
- **Time:** 40 minutes

**Notes:** Paul Simon wrote this song aged just 21, and it is believed by many to be inspired by the 1963 assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy. Taken from Simon & Garfunkel’s debut album, 1964’s Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M. it became their first hit when it was remixed in 1965. A successful cover version was released by American heavy metal Disturbed in 2015. The descriptions on this worksheet come from the site https://justrandomthings.com/2022/07/28/simon-garfunkel-the-sound-of-silence-lyrics-meaning-revealed/.

1. Before class make the necessary number of copies of the lyrics description page, and cut each one into five strips. (This activity can also be done by simply distributing the uncut page).

2. Ask students to work in pairs or small groups, and distribute the cut-up strips. Explain that these are the descriptions of the five verses of the song The Sound Of Silence by Simon & Garfunkel. Give them some time to read them. Do not worry about vocabulary at this stage.

3. Tell them they are going to listen to the song – can they put the descriptions in the correct order?

4. Do not feedback yet, but give each group a copy of the lyric sheet. Ask them to check their answers. Feedback.
   **Key:** d, c, e, a, b.

5. Discuss any difficult vocabulary, then play the song. Students sing along.

6. Suggest students go online to research interpretations of the lyrics.
This verse is a significant one in “The Sound of Silence”, as indicated by lyrics, music, and the harmonization that is included in it. This is the vision that Simon wanted to share with the world. The neon light under its cold glare exposes droves of people, each of them trapped in their own version of loneliness. Simon at the time of composing saw how each individual and humanity as a whole has become isolated from each other as a result of progress. The neon light symbolizes the impersonal and modern world, where lives are defined by goals and ambitions of reaching the top while leaving others behind.

b. Once humans are unable to communicate with each other, they become slaves to the system. Their lives are ruled by dollar bills and superficial pleasures. Culture and society are likewise shaped by these people, fast living marked by celebrities, gossip, billboard signs, and the mass-produced art and literature that panders to their new religion. Commercialism and mass media has taken over every aspect of human life. The truth of humanity is now hidden in the places that are abandoned and overlooked – subway walls, apartments of the poor, and whispers uttered in the dark. There the people would still sing their songs, graffiti marks their dissent, and pockets of quiet resistance against the system will continue to grow in the dark until silence becomes sound again.

c. Now we come to the vision itself that the narrator saw in his dreams. Again there is an emphasis on the sense of loneliness. The imagery created through the poetry of Simon’s language enhances this feeling – narrow streets lighted by the soft glow of a street lamp, a collar turned up against the cold as the narrator is out walking alone in the dark. The lyrics make it seem as if the narrator is the only man alive, making his way in the cold and dark. And this loneliness is suddenly interrupted by the glare of a neon light. The contrast of this line is striking. With the word ‘neon,’ the listener is transported to modern times – bustling streets full of people. The light itself is unnatural and artificial, standing apart from the cold and dark, stunning the narrator – because now the silence is broken.

d. One of the most well-known opening lines there is, “The Sound of Silence” starts off with a greeting. We imagine a conversation carried out in the darkness of the night, in the quiet. But the darkness is also a symbol of loneliness, of being in a place where confessions are made in secret and there is no one to listen to. The loneliness comes out more because this is not the first time the narrator has done this – he has greeted the darkness again and again. It is familiar darkness to him and perhaps a place of comfort where he feels seen and understood. The narrator is there to confess a “vision” that came to him in sleep that he can’t seem to get rid of. So in darkness and in silence, he is there to say it out loud, giving voice to the thoughts that are in his head even if there is no one listening to him. This brings out a sense of urgency that keeps rising as the song progresses, emphasized by the music that accompanies each verse.

e. Here we find a young Simon challenging this new norm of social withdrawal and isolation. He chides the multitudes surrounding him, saying that silence can be deadly cancer – it kills unseen and unnoticed. He braves this cold and lonely world to reach out fearlessly, so that he may teach how to communicate again and to break away from the silence. However, his words go unheard and unheeded, like raindrops that become background noise.
Hello darkness, my old friend
I've come to talk with you again
Because a vision softly creeping
Left its seeds while I was sleeping
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains
Within the sound of silence

In restless dreams I walked alone
Narrow streets of cobblestone
'Neath the halo of a street lamp
I turned my collar to the cold and damp
When my eyes were stabbed by the flash of a neon light
That split the night
And touched the sound of silence

And in the naked light I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more
People talking without speaking
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share
No one dared
Disturb the sound of silence

"Fools" said I, "You do not know
Silence like a cancer grows
Hear my words that I might teach you
Take my arms that I might reach you"
But my words like silent raindrops fell
And echoed in the wells of silence

And the people bowed and prayed
To the neon god they made
And the sign flashed out its warning
In the words that it was forming
And the sign said, "The words of the prophets
Are written on the subway walls
And tenement halls
And whispered in the sound of silence"