

## One Could Say What One Meant : Communicating Feelings in To the Lighthouse

原田, 洋海  
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# One Could Say What One Meant: Communicating Feelings in *To the Lighthouse*\*

Hiromi Harada

## Introduction

In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Virginia Woolf constantly shows us characters' consciousness as she did in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Conversations among them are not described so much and it does not seem that they can communicate with one another completely. Some critics focus on how the characters in the novel communicate with and understand others, and insist that the characters can understand them without words. Sonoko Matsumiya, for example, states that the important thing is not conversation and its contents but communion, the fact that characters share a moment and a place together (Matsumiya 1). For another example, Martha C. Nussbaum says that they can comprehend one another almost perfectly even with their trivial words and little expressions if they have been married for a long time and are extremely intimate (Nussbaum 749).

Focusing on "words," Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe often refer to the ineffectiveness of words, and it is certain that communication without words is sometimes achieved. As Gayatri C. Spivak says, the most successful communication in the novel is the silent one between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay at the party, in which they can accurately read each other's intentions only with eye contact (Spivak 43). Lily, one of the main characters, tries to understand the late Mrs. Ramsay in the process of painting her portrait. She concludes that the best way to understand a subject is through one's own impressions and individual ideas.

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Indeed, communication without words is considered as one of the main themes of the novel and words are regarded as ineffective, but words sometimes have influence upon characters in the novel. Mrs. Ramsay and Lily distrust words, and they declare that even though they talk with others, they cannot communicate their own feelings and understand anyone. They, however, also hope that something will be changed by someone's trivial words, for example, Mr. Ramsay's or Mr. Carmichael's. In fact, Woolf shows us that trivial words can relieve conflicts that arise in relationship between characters.

In this paper, focusing on Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, I will first observe that they do not trust in the power of words and almost despair of communicating their own feelings. Secondly, I will confirm that the author depicts the harmony and pleasure brought by words in this work, and that she does not necessarily think words are completely ineffective. I will finally clarify that although Woolf herself recognizes the ineffectiveness, she believes the possibility of perfect communication with words.

## I. Distrust of the Power of Words

This novel begins with Mrs. Ramsay's words to her son, James, who wants to go to the lighthouse: "Yes, of course, if it's fine to-morrow" (7).<sup>1</sup> These words give James great pleasure. In the next moment, though, his father's words "But . . . it won't be fine" (8) ruin it. Offended by her husband's contradiction, Mrs. Ramsay thinks the following:

To pursue truth with such astonishing lack of consideration for other people's feelings, to rend *the thin veils of civilization* so wantonly, so brutally, was to her so horrible an outrage of human decency that, without replying, dazed and blinded, she bent her head as if to let the pelt of jagged hail, the drench of dirty water, bespatter her unrebuked. (37,

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<sup>1</sup> All the quotations from *To the Lighthouse* are based on the Penguin edition (1992). As for further references to the book, only the page numbers will be noted in brackets.

emphasis mine)

She covers stark realities with gentle words, “the thin veil of civilization,” so that her son will not get disappointed. Before the party, she puts two of her children, Cam and James, in bed. Cam is scared of the skull of a beast hung on the wall and will not go to bed. The mother literally “covers” the skull with her green shawl, and lulls her daughter making her believe that it is a bird’s nest or a beautiful mountain.<sup>2</sup> In this manner, Mrs. Ramsay provides comfort to others by covering stark realities with the thin veil of kind words.

However, this also means that words, for Mrs. Ramsay, can disguise the truth or do not always tell the truth. While her words serve to others as a thin veil, they do not represent but distort her original feelings as soon as they are articulated. Just as Lily, who loses her original visions at the moment she paints the images onto the canvas, Mrs. Ramsay cannot completely communicate her feelings because her words cover and disguise them. She herself recognizes it, and thinks “she never could say what she felt” (134). Both in a positive and negative way, words can disassemble the realities and her true feelings. When Mrs. Ramsay asks Cam to deliver a message, she considers:

The words seemed to be dropped into a well, where, if the waters were clear, they were also so extraordinarily distorting that, even as they descended, one saw them twisting about to make Heaven knows what pattern on the floor of the child’s mind. (61)

As Cam is still a little girl, the mother may only be worried about her inability of delivering the message correctly, but it is certain that she is also concerned about words distorting intentions. While Mrs. Ramsay takes advantage of words in order

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<sup>2</sup> Cam remembers the lullaby when she falls asleep on the boat to the lighthouse. These words echo rhythmically in her mind, stay at the bottom of her consciousness for a long time, and revive to her after her mother’s death.

to conceal stark realities, she recognizes that she cannot completely trust in the power of words. She feels both the useful aspect and the treacherous manner of words.

Lily Briscoe trusts much less in words than Mrs. Ramsay, and she herself complains that she cannot express correctly what she feels:

—but what could one say to her [Mrs. Ramsay]? ‘I’m in love with you?’  
No, that was not true. ‘I’m in love with this all,’ waving her hand at the hedge, at the house, at the children? It was absurd, it was impossible.  
*One could not say what one meant.* (24, emphasis mine)

Even though she tries to communicate her own feelings, she finds her words untrue or absurd. Lily also realizes that the articulated words can distort the truth. She especially hates diplomatic language because it deliberately distorts true thoughts. At the party, she blames in her heart Mrs. Ramsay for using diplomatic language, and she finds herself insincere when she speaks, against her will, to Mr. Tansley, accepting Mrs. Ramsay’s request to do so.

It is possible that, because of her distrust of words, Lily chooses painting as a way of representing herself. She makes much of sincerity in painting, and she tries to paint accurately what she sees.

The jacmanna was bright violet; the wall staring white. *She would not have considered it honest to tamper with the bright violet and the staring white*, since she saw them like that, fashionable though it was, since Mr. Pounceforte’s visit, to see everything pale, elegant, semi-transparent. Then beneath the colour there was the shape. She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked . . . (23, emphasis mine)

Although her paintings are impressionistic, she tries to paint the shape beneath the color, namely the truth. In the point of pursuing the truth, she is similar to Mr.

Ramsay. He thinks that his wife is not honest when she says to their son that it will be fine the next day. He is confident in his saying, as seen in the following quotation:

What he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; *never tampered with a fact*; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all of his own children, who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult; facts uncompromising . . . (8, emphasis mine)

Lily and Mr. Ramsay respectively think it dishonest to tamper with reality. One should not idealize but use true colors and true words. Lily knows that, without honesty, she cannot catch the truth even in painting. In “words,” which she distrusts, she cannot express herself in the least.

She recognizes not only that she cannot communicate her true feelings, but also that she cannot capture the essence of anyone through their words. She struggles to disclose the essence of Mrs. Ramsay throughout the novel. She regards Mrs. Ramsay’s secret as a sacred epigraph on a table, and thinks that if she could read it, she could solve the mystery of life. She suspects, however, that she cannot express it in words even if she gets the secret, and concludes that it is not the written or spoken knowledge but the indefinable intimacy with Mrs. Ramsay that she really desires.

As observed above, Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe acknowledge that they cannot express their feelings through their words, which distort the truth and prevent them from capturing the essence of a person.

## II. A Breath of Hope for Words

The two women lament over the ineffectiveness of words, but this can also be the evidence that they desire to achieve communication through words. Lily feels an impulse to fling herself at Mrs. Ramsay’s knee and to say her own feelings, and considers about words as the following shows:

Little words that broke up the thought and dismembered it said nothing. 'About life, about death; about Mrs. Ramsay'—no, she thought, one could say nothing to nobody. The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low. Then one gave it up; then the idea sunk back again; then one became like most middle-aged people, cautious, furtive, with wrinkles between the eyes and a look of perpetual apprehension. For how could one express in words these emotions of the body? (193-94)

This idea seems to emphasize the ineffectiveness of words, but it paradoxically shows that she has often tried to express something by articulating words. In a similar way, their repeated laments over the ineffectiveness of words imply that they have tried and failed to represent themselves so far and that they desire communication with words in fact.

It is not too much to say that although they fail to convey their own emotions, they do not perfectly despair of representing themselves with words. They hope that someone's trivial words will influence on others. At the beginning of the party, they are not unified as a group and sit discretely apart from each other. Gradually they begin to have some conversations with one another, but while Mr. Tansley is talking, Mrs. Ramsay, Lily, and William Bankes feel bored, think that something is lacking, and hope that the insides of their minds are not detected by the others. Matsumiya takes this scene as an example for a kind of communion, and insists that they are unconsciously united at the moment (Matsumiya 8). Just after this scene, however, Mrs. Ramsay hopes that her husband speaks something, even if only a word, and then the atmosphere of the party will be changed. Even after the party, she thinks "[i]f only he would speak!" (128). As mentioned above, she blames her husband for "such astonishing lack of consideration for other people's feelings" (37), but she actually respects and trusts him, and believes firmly that his words can bring about changes.

In the third part of the novel, Lily paints a picture in pursuit of the essence of Mrs. Ramsay, and hopes that Mr. Carmichael, who lies down near her easel, will speak to her:

‘What does it mean? How do you explain it all?’ she wanted to say, turning to Mr. Carmichael again. For the whole world seemed to have dissolved in this early morning hour into a pool of thought, a deep basin of reality, and one could almost fancy that *had Mr. Carmichael spoken, a little tear would have rent the surface of the pool*. And then? Something would emerge. A hand would be shoved up, a blade would be flashed. (194, emphasis mine)

They do not have as close a relationship as Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay have. They only exchange greetings and talk about weather. Lily, however, puts her easel “not too close to Mr. Carmichael, but close enough for his protection” (161). She speaks to him in her heart many times while she is painting. She is sure that he can hear her inner voice, and she feels sympathy with him.<sup>3</sup> Since Mr. Carmichael is now a successful poet, she expects that his words will inspire her to be more creative.

### III. Harmony and Pleasure Brought by Words

In the previous chapter, we observed that Mrs. Ramsay and Lily hope for communication by words and expect someone to speak to them although they regard words as ineffective. In this chapter, we will see that some words actually bring about harmony and pleasure to characters in this novel. Indeed, as mentioned above, Mrs. Ramsay’s words—the words to her son about going to the lighthouse and the words to her daughter in making her believe the skull to be a non-threatening thing—offer consolation and pleasure to them, but the words are not always sincere in

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<sup>3</sup> Although she thinks “[t]hey had not needed to speak. They had been thinking the same things and he had answered her without her asking him anything” (225), it is just after Mr. Carmichael says “[t]hey will have landed” that she feels the sympathy, and therefore it can be said that these trivial words of his make her sure of the reconciliation.



that they draw a veil and conceal the truth. However, it will be clarified in this chapter that there are words which do not just provide comfort but can express the truth and communicate feelings without distorting them.

One example is Mr. Ramsay's words to James, which have been often quoted by many critics. In the third part of the novel, while James steers toward the lighthouse, he feels hostile toward his father and is certain that the father will never praise him. However, when the voyage is over and Mr. Ramsay says to him "Well done!" (223), the two syllables boost his ego and mend their relationship. As quoted above, Mr. Ramsay does not unreasonably tamper with facts, and has confidence to make correct decisions. Since James knows his father's character, he can regard Mr. Ramsay's words "Well done!" as expressing the truth or his true feeling. These words are neither compliments nor diplomatic language, but the sincere praise for James' steering, which is, as Cam says, what James has been wanting for a long time.

After successfully steering the boat to the island, James and Cam step on shore after their father. At that time the children, who had followed reluctantly in the morning, would like to express their feelings and give him anything.

What do you want? they both wanted to ask. They both wanted to say, Ask us anything and we will give it you. But he did not ask them anything. He sat and looked at the island and he might be thinking, We perished, each alone, or he might be thinking, I have reached it. I have found it, but he said nothing. (224)

Matsumiya quotes these passages and points out that although they say nothing, the children follow their father and reconciliation between them is achieved (Matsumiya 15-16). It is worth noticing that Mr. Ramsay's two simple words bring the reconciliation. The act of "giving" is what Mrs. Ramsay had been doing until her death, and Mr. Ramsay has been "given" sympathy and consolation by women such as his wife and Lily. In this scene, Mr. Ramsay, who has always been demanding of

women, gives James what he wants by his sincere words.

Just as Mr. Ramsay's words bring the pleasure to his son and complete reconciliation among the three on the boat, Lily's words please Mr. Ramsay. In this scene, he comes to demand sympathy from her when she is painting, but she cannot say anything witty to him. Fortunately, she looks at his feet and cries "What beautiful boots!" (167). As soon as she says so, she becomes ashamed of saying such a silly thing which is not what he wants at all. Contrary to her expectations, her trivial words drive away his somber mood and make him smile. Just before she exclaims about his boots, she thinks as the following:

Remarkable boots they were too, Lily thought, looking down at them: sculptured; colossal; like everything that Mr. Ramsay wore, from his frayed tie to his half-buttoned waistcoat, his own indisputably. She could see them walking to his room of their own accord, expressive in his absence of pathos, surliness, ill-temper, charm. (167)

Her words "What beautiful boots!" represent her thoughts and feelings without being distorted, and communication by words, which she has almost given up, is unexpectedly achieved. The later part of the quotation reminds us of the twist of Mrs. Ramsay's glove in which Lily tries to find her essence. In a similar way, Mr. Ramsay's boots embody his own characteristics such as "pathos, surliness, ill-temper," and "charm." As Alice van Buren Kelly and Matsumiya point out, when his boots are praised, Mr. Ramsay feels himself accepted by her (Kelly 118; Matsumiya 14). Lily's simple words bring about the reconciliation between them, and then it allows Lily to hope to say something more to him.

Not only these casual words but also poems have influence upon characters. Mr. Ramsay often recites William Cowper's "The Castaway," which Woolf and Leslie Stephen, her father, read thoroughly.<sup>4</sup> The image of the reciting father

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<sup>4</sup> According to Roger D. Lund, Cowper is one of the authors whom Virginia used to read in the summer of 1897, when she was tormented by the grief of losing her sister Stella only two years

appears as a main theme of the novel in Woolf's diary when she begins to write the novel.<sup>5</sup> Although it is not until the third part begins that Mr. Ramsay actually recites the poem, it plays a significant role for the reconciliation among him and the two children, especially Cam, on the boat. As Lund points out, his reciting implies his self-absorption and self-pity which resemble Cowper's spiritual despair represented in the poem. Indeed the poem can irritate James and Cam, but the daughter unconsciously murmurs it. This means that she "discovers herself sharing her father's dream, and in some measure her reconciliation with her father arises from her acceptance of his tragic view of life" (Lund 89). Even though she talks little with her father on the boat, she understands him through repeating the same phrase.

One of the most important things at the dinner party is reading aloud "Luriana Lurilee." While reciting the poem, even Mr. Carmichael, who usually adopts an attitude of offhandedness toward Mrs. Ramsay, stands up and has a friendly attitude.<sup>6</sup> When she listens to the poem, Mrs. Ramsay thinks as the following:

She did not know what they meant, but, like music, the words seemed to be spoken by her own voice, outside her self, saying quite easily and naturally what had been in her mind the whole evening while she said different things. She knew, without looking round, that every one at the table was listening to the voice . . . with the same sort of relief and pleasure that she had, as if this were, at last, the natural thing to say, this were their own voice speaking. (120)

Although their feelings are not directly spoken, she believes firmly that all they want to say is represented in the poem. She feels "that community of feeling with other

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after her mother's death. (Lund 77)

<sup>5</sup> In the diary entry dated 14th of May 1925, Woolf writes "This is going to be fairly short: to have father's character done complete in it; & mothers; & St Ives; & childhood . . . . But the center is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting We perished, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel—However, I must refrain" (*Diary* 18-19)

<sup>6</sup> Throughout the novel Mr. Carmichael is never more friendly than in this scene. The reconciliation between him and Mrs. Ramsay seems to be achieved through reciting the poem.

people which emotion gives as if the walls of partition had become so thin that practically . . . it was all one stream . . . .” (123). As Yuko Doi states, the scene of the party remains a shared experience with them all, not an individual one (Doi 122). Even though, contrary to Mrs. Ramsay’s expectations, no one recalls this party in the novel, to share experiences with others and remember them can be a way to understand others just as Lily understands Mrs. Ramsay through painting and as Woolf herself recollects her parents through writing this novel, which she calls “Elegy.”<sup>7</sup> It is “Luriana Lurilee” that can remind the characters of the party as a shared experience.

In this novel, trivial words as well as poems can not only represent feelings directly and bring about reconciliation and pleasure, but also mitigate the friction which Mr. Ramsay generates between himself and other characters. While Mrs. Ramsay and Lily regard articulated words as ineffective, it is also depicted in the novel that articulation can be a way to understand others.

## Conclusion

Indeed, in *To the Lighthouse*, communication without words is achieved and the ineffectiveness of words is often emphasized. Woolf herself says in her essay “Words are an impure medium; better far to have been born into the silent kingdom of paint” (*The Captain’s Death Bed* 176). On the other hand, articulated words can represent feelings, sometimes unexpectedly as we have seen. Some characters’ hope for words, which is clarified when they lament their helplessness in using them, also reflects Woolf’s hope itself. Although it seems that she insists that people cannot say what they feel, she, in fact, depicts in her works the possibility that words, “an impure medium,” can bring about harmony and pleasure and enable people to understand each other.

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<sup>7</sup> In the diary entry dated 27th of June 1925, Woolf writes “I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant “novel.” A new—by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?” (*Diary* 34)

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