The Beautiful Caves of Virginia Woolf

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Behind the Words:
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The words 'woman', 'mujer', 'Weib' and 'femme' have nearly the same meaning, yet their configuration and pronunciation differ greatly, showing that the relationship between concepts, images and words is arbitrary. Words come to have meaning not because of some external exigency but through social consensus. The linguistic system consists of signs, linguistic units which are made up of two interrelated yet asymmetrical parts, a signifier and a signified. Signifiers are the material support of language; they could be described as a series of sounds and/or a network of written letters. For communication to take place, each sound or group of letters is a signifier which needs to be differentiated from all other signifiers in its category. The link between signifier and signified is an arbitrary social convention. (Furman 67)

Although the above passage taken from Nelly Furman's "The Politics of Language: Beyond the Gender Principle?" is both dense and lengthy, it is an appropriate preface to an essay such as this. Discussing the use of language as a tool for human expression creates difficulties and distress. How, one must ask, can I argue that language is an inadequate tool for expression if it is the very tool that I have chosen to use?

Within To the Lighthouse and Orlando, Virginia Woolf repeatedly ponders that question. Although she critiques the problems of language, she attempts to carve out a new mode of expression within language by shifting the focus off of particular words and onto the mood invoked from a series of present and absent signifiers. Woolf's awareness that language is an inadequate tool for human expression is often voiced through her characters. In To the Lighthouse, Lily Briscoe, a character whose experiences with painting suggest a parallel with Woolf's own writing, thinks, "One could not say what one meant" (24). Simply stated, Lily sums up the problem with language: one can never express exactly what one feels.

Describing her process of characterization, Woolf once wrote: "I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect [and] each comes to daylight at the present moment" (Showalter xxviii-xxix). Although Woolf states that in reference to her characters, it is also a description of her use of language: she digs out beautiful caves behind her words. Words, as Furman argued, are units within a linguistic system, strings of phonemes that together create a particular signifier that, due to social constructs, signals to the reader a signified. Through her careful negotiations with language, Woolf uses words while remaining aware of their socially contrived significance. It is through this awareness that she digs out beautiful caves behind the words. The words themselves are individual signifiers that, together, create a series of signified references that form an impression. A series of sentences, in turn, create a series of impressions. These impressions then culminate, in Woolf's work, to produce a particular image. It is through such imagery that she attempts to escape the trappings of language. Dismissing the mythical "perfect word," which she addresses in Jacob's Room ("Then his mouth - but surely, of all futile occupations this of cataloguing features is the worst. One word is sufficient. But if one cannot find it?" [59]), she instead creates caves behind her words to house her images; images that connect and come to daylight as the novel.

"Meaning is never truly present, but is only constructed through the potentially endless process of referring to other, absent signifiers" (Moi 106); Woolf's writing builds upon this concept by creating imagery through the signified objects, as well as through absent words which correspond with the objects. Woolf uses standard language as a screen under which she weaves together images created by the particular signifiers that she chooses. The imagery she creates is not dependent on individual word choice; instead it is the relation of the words to each other that invokes a mood which, in turn, is an adequate form of expression.

In To the Lighthouse, Woolf creates such an image for both Lily Briscoe and the reader. Highly critical of Mr. Ramsay, Lily must constantly remind herself that he is a great man - a philosopher - in order to consciously respect him ("'Oh but,' said Lily, 'think of his work!' " [28]). It is "his work" that prompts Lily, and consequently the reader, to picture a kitchen table " 'when you're not there' " (28). "So she always saw, when she thought of Mr. Ramsay's work, a scrubbed kitchen table... a phantom kitchen table, one of those scrubbed board tables, grained and knotted, whose virtue seems to have been laid bare by years of muscular integrity, which struck there, it four legs in the air" (28). The example of the kitchen table is two-
fold: the word "work" in connection with the words "Mr." and "Ramsay" are signifiers to Lily which produce the kitchen table as the signified; second, the kitchen table is an image that Woolf creates in the cave behind her words. But Lily, Mr. Ramsay's work always connotes the kitchen table, even years later when she and the Ramsays first return to the summer house after Mrs. Ramsay's death.

The kitchen table was something visionary, austere; something bare, hard, not ornamental. There was no colour to it; it was all edges and angles; it was uncompromisingly plain. But Mr. Ramsay kept always his eyes fixed upon it, never allowed himself to be distracted or deterred, until his face became worn and ascetic and partook of this unornamented beauty which so deeply impressed her. ... He must have had his doubts about that table, she supposed; whether the table was a real table; whether it was worth the time he gave to it; whether he was able after all to find it. (169-70)

A lonely kitchen table will forever symbolize what the important Mr. Ramsay thought about when he worked.

Woolf's image of the kitchen table is created, half hidden, in the cave behind her words. Although Lily describes her vision of the table to the reader, Woolf leaves it unremarkable. The kitchen table, then, may sit in one reader's mind as the round, blond, scratched table of her youth, yet to another it may become something entirely different. The image then is created, not with description detailed to the last wooden peg, but with the flow of words producing an image that the reader must bring to the novel.

Another image that Woolf uses to communicate meaning without direct linguistic expression is that conveyed through Mrs. Ramsay's reading process in *To the Lighthouse*. The depiction of the process of reading expresses Woolf's larger meaning: the fluid, changeable nature of female intelligence. Especially when contrasted with Mr. Ramsay's male intelligence, which even he thinks of in terms of definitive, alphabetic linearity ("After Q there are a number of letters, and then the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in the distance. Z is only reached once by one man in a generation. Still, if he could reach R it would be something" [39]), the striking difference of Mrs. Ramsay's female intelligence becomes evident. In addition, the tension between the two intelligences is expressed through the jarring interruption of Mr. Ramsay slapping his thighs. This tension is the expression hoping to be captured behind the superficial structure of Woolf's words.

Yet there another level to the passage exists: that which forms inside the cave behind the words. The mental image created here is descriptive — "climbing backwards, upwards, shoving her way up under petals that action packed, impelling rapid movement by the quick succession of verbs, further modified by adverbs. To this reader, Mrs. Ramsay is no longer "sitting down in a particular chair under a particular lamp" knitting [127]; instead, she becomes transported into a jungle where she climbs up large green stalks, swings on vines, and gets softly cocooned within fragrant flowers. Like Mrs. Ramsay, the reader may "not know at first what the words [mean] at all" (129), yet as she reads, and so reading she was ascending, she felt, on to the top, on to the summit. How satisfying! How restful! All the odds and ends of the day sucked out of life and held rounded here — the sonnet. (131)

Although Woolf does not tell the reader that the scene changes as Mrs. Ramsay explores the sonnet, it is expressed nonetheless with the change in mood and tempo. Woolf counts on the dialogue between reader and writer, causing the reader to interact and produce the absent signifiers that are individually triggered by the particular signifiers present.

Woolf continues experimenting with creating a new form of human expression via language in *Orlando*, a fantasy disguised as a fictional biography. One of the images that Woolf creates in *Orlando* and expands upon is the relationship between language, specifically names, and mood. Orlando recognizes the multiple meanings of language and uses it to express the variations in her mood by conveying, through a single word, an abundance of emotions. Woolf explores the relationship of signifiers to signifieds in her imagery concerning Orlando and Marmaduke Bonhopt Shelmerdine. The biographer explains to the reader, in Woolf's voice, the significance of Orlando's nicknames for Bonhopt Shelmerdine. Each nickname, a single word, denotes a particular mood: "Mar" (meaning hot baths and evening fires) or Shelmerdine (meaning crocuses in autumn woods) or Bonhopt (meaning the death we die daily) [213]. In an expanded explanation of Orlando's mood, the biographer notes when she called him by his second name, "Bonhopt", it should signify to the reader that she was in a solitary mood, felt them both as specks on a desert, was desirous only of meeting death by herself, for people die daily, at dinner-tables, or like this, out of doors in the autumn woods... all of which the reader should hear in her voice when she said "Bonhopt." (179)

Orlando uses the nicknames as signifiers, expressing the varying imagery through the use of one word, delineated for the reader by the biographer. By doing so, the signifier "Mar," for example, then expresses the mood surrounding hot baths and evening fires. The mood is expressed through descriptive words, which in no manner describe anything logically related to the name. Instead, it becomes socially learned, from Woolf to the reader, that Mar translates into warmth, comfort, relaxation, and spices. By clearly giving the reader a reference for the signifier-signified relationship, she helps to form a personal image, a beautiful cave, within the reader's mind of the mood expressed through the utterance of "Mar."

It becomes evident after reading Virginia Woolf's later novels that she believes language is an inadequate tool for human expression. Although this may seem hypocritical, considering that as a novelist her main mode of expression is through written language, it is not. Woolf critiques the limitations of language, yet attempts to expand its boundaries through her own writing, illustrated through her consistent creation of characters wrestling with the difficulties of expressing themselves via language. While recognizing the problem, she actively attempts to carve out new forms of expression using language. Woolf uses signifiers designed to create individualistic images as the signified. Through her imagery, Woolf then expresses mood and emotion without having to say what she meant. Doing so, she moves past the superficiality of the bare sentence to conjure images in the beautiful caves behind her words.


