

Syntax of the Unspeakable: The Limits of Language and Individuality in "Summer Flowers"

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Hara Tamiki's "Summer Flowers" originates from notes he recorded less than 36 hours after the August 6 atomic bomb fell. As an eyewitness account weaving between observations of external reality and the self, "Summer Flowers" explores the challenge of elucidating through language what it means to *feel* as an individual in the immediate aftermath of collective violence. Tamiki confronts the question directly, writing the word "felt" four times within the fifteen-page story. Through his syntactic choices and careful placement of the word "felt," Tamiki collapses distinctions between the self and the other, suggesting that in the wake of mass catastrophe, individual sensation becomes inseparable from the shared, collective body, rendering the notion of individual feeling nearly impossible.

The first mention of "felt" showcases the limitations of language in capturing one's physical and emotional experiences in the face of calamity. The word arrives early in the story, seconds after the bomb fell:

Right from the start, when I received the blow to my head and things went black, I knew I wasn't dead. Then, thinking what an enormous inconvenience this all was, I tried to work myself up to anger. My cry sounded in my ear like someone else's voice. But as the situation around me, though still hazy, began to resolve itself, I soon felt as if I were standing on a stage that had been set for a tragedy. (46)

Tamiki cannot express what he "felt" directly; instead, he mediates his sensations through simile. Rather than naming a physical reaction or emotional state, he feels "as if" he were on a stage. The simile not only undermines authorial certainty but also transports Tamiki into the literary landscape: into a space of theatricality, detached from the immediacy of violence and injury. The ambiguous nature of how he "felt" is exacerbated by the fact that he "knew" he was not dead and was able to keep "thinking" about the bomb as an inconvenience. These two verbs operate

without interference, connecting Tamiki, the subject, straight to the object; in turn, the simile with “felt” exacerbates the disjointed nature of feeling.

Furthermore, Tamiki only makes sense of what he “felt” through the image of a “stage,” introducing a doubled consciousness: he is at once cognizant of himself as an actor and an audience member. The attempt to “work” himself up to anger underscores the preoccupation with an imagined audience, as if he is aware that others expect him to feel anger in such circumstances. Tamiki thus observes emotion as becoming something to be performed rather than experienced. Yes, his cry even returns to him like “somebody else’s voice,” marking this profound alienation from the body — the thing through which one feels. In this way, Tamiki underscores the removed ability to articulate what one “felt” due to one’s blurred relation with the self following catastrophic violence.

The second use of “felt” underscores this dissociation, furthering Tamiki as someone who witnesses his own body as an audience member rather than the actor. After his eldest brother turns up, Tamiki writes, “When I sat down on the narrow path on the river bank, I felt, despite everything, that I was now safe” (49). While Tamiki no longer clings to simile, he still syntactically undermines what he “felt.” The insertion of “despite everything” interrupts “felt” from “that I was now safe,” building a linguistic and temporal barrier to the feeling of safety. Moreover, the qualifier again highlights the preoccupation with what one is *supposed* to feel: since the narrative is written retrospectively, “despite everything” may function as an authorial critique, where the present Tamiki inserts that it is inappropriate to have felt “safe” then, knowing the scope of devastation that occurred. However, since “Summer Flowers” takes place in the past tense, it is equally possible that Tamiki, in that moment of sitting down, was already aware of the absurdity of feeling “now safe.” In that case, Tamiki deepens the text’s portrayal of

dissociation, as Tamiki simultaneously experiences and questions having “felt” safe. The phrase “despite everything” therefore depicts Tamiki's cognitive awareness that what he “felt” exists in tension with his surrounding reality, as though his mind must resist his body.

Tamiki adds a dimension to this dissociation with the third instance of “felt,” where he collapses the boundary between self and other through a sudden focus on physicality. After Tamiki encounters a clump of bodies so wrecked that he could not tell their gender, he writes: “Their faces were swollen to about half again normal size, deformed and ugly, leaving only their burned and tangled hair as a sign that they were women. At first sight, rather than pity, I felt my hair stand on end” (52). The qualifier “rather than pity” again elucidates the intellectualizing — and thus removal of immediacy — of feeling. However, unlike earlier moments, Tamiki does not separate the word “felt” from its object. The sentence moves directly to a physical description, suggesting the primacy of physical sensation in face of the visuals of violence. The repetition of “hair” further suggests a collective somatic suffering, where the women’s “tangled hair” find a reflexive echo in Tamiki’s body as he “felt” his “hair stand on end.” Notably, the dead bodies already lack individuality; Tamiki can rarely decipher their faces, much less their gender. This literal dehumanization, combined with the way the language connects Tamiki to the dehumanized bodies, underscores the collapse of personal subjectivity: in confronting mass death, the human body can no longer “feel” as an individual.

The melding of the collective consciousness is epitomized in the final mention of “felt,” where Tamiki shifts the narrative into third person. He writes, “N. felt the bomb’s shock at the precise moment the train entered a tunnel” (59). Sensation is no longer anchored in Tamiki but displaced onto N. The shift to third person creates narrative distance, but it also conveys the fluid boundary between self and other during extreme violence, as both N. and Tamiki “felt”

physically the bomb's shock. In this way, "feeling" becomes fundamentally collective. The story thus emphasizes the significance of a shared register of bodily experience, where individual identity dissolves, and violence is apprehended via observation of the other. Through the syntactic evolution of the word "felt," "Summer Flowers" suggests that while what one feels remains indescribable in the immediate aftermath of violence, it becomes legible within the shared, collective body experiencing the same physical trauma.

The Hidden Face of Horror in *Apocalypse Now*

In contrast, *Apocalypse Now* explores violence through the cohesive medium of film, combining dialogue, mise-en-scène, cinematography, and editing in an attempt to convey what the utter *horror* of war means. Interestingly, director Francis Ford Coppola also confronts the notion of "horror" directly, with Kurtz saying the word "horror" eleven times total. However, through both dialogue and the layered formal elements of film, Coppola ultimately reiterates that the psychological depth of war's horror can never be portrayed in totality, whether through language or film.

After Willard contemplates Kurtz's character, deeming him a "broken up" man, Kurtz emerges from the darkness to deliver a monologue. Kurtz begins, "I've seen horrors. Horrors that you've seen" (2:09:39). His voice trails in quietly, the camera still lingering on Willard's sunlit nape amidst a shot of black. With so few visual cues, one's attention seizes upon Kurtz's voice. At the same time, though, the dialogue confines horror to the visual realm. Kurtz has "seen" horrors — not witnessed, not experienced, not heard of. Perhaps, then, Coppola suggests that horror is registered through the eye like a silent film, with other senses dimming amid the grotesque imagery of war. Interestingly, Kurtz also declares that "you've seen" the horrors,

which indicates not only an objectivity to horror but an implicit understanding between him and Willard. Since one can scarcely see Willard's face — and Kurtz remains off-screen — the viewer feels excluded from the conversation: the two men share an understanding of horror that Kurtz does not elaborate upon. In an alternative reading, however, the overwhelming darkness of the shot may suggest that “you” is the viewer, not Willard. If this is the case, the dialogue may suggest that, through the film, the viewer has “seen” moments of horror, such as when Chief Phillips was impaled in the chest.

Regardless of what one has or has not “seen,” however, Kurtz proceeds to state the difficult nature of articulating what the horror of war *is*: “It's impossible for words to describe what is necessary to those who do not know what horror means” (2:10:00). Crucially, Kurtz does not say it is impossible to describe horror. No, he declares that it is impossible to describe “what is necessary.” In context, the phrase “what is necessary” grasps at the ugly essence of war: Kurtz wishes to explain the horrors he has “seen,” but he cannot explain all that is “necessary” to understand such scenes if one does not already “know what horror means.” It is a paradoxical cycle that exposes the limits of language, like when one cannot define a word without using itself. There are no fundamental words that can compose or “describe” what is necessary for “horror.” Building upon this irony, Kurtz delivers this sentence as Willard exits the shot, leaving the screen entirely black for seven seconds. Despite it being “impossible for words to describe what is necessary,” Kurtz attempts to do so with nothing *but* words. Coppola strips the shot of cinema's rich arsenal of visual and auditory details. He enhances attention to dialogue, exacerbating the irony of Kurtz's monologue, again exposing the cyclical frustration of the impossibility of capturing “horror” in its entirety. Furthermore, a critical detail is that Kurtz does not say it's impossible to describe what is necessary to those who have not “seen” horror. If that

were the case, those who have “seen” may better understand it through language. No, one must already know what horror “means” — yet how can one know what it “means” if there are no words to describe it? This failure in logic plays upon the paradox, where film struggles to convey the meaning or depth of “horror,” even if the audience can observe it audiovisually.

Kurtz continues, “Horror. Horror has a face. And you must make a friend of horror. Horror and moral terror are your friends. If they are not, then they are enemies to be feared. They are truly enemies” (2:10: 29). Again, Kurtz struggles with articulation. The repetition of the word “horror” emphasizes its elusiveness; it itself is the only word that captures its weight and experience. Furthermore, the dialogue evokes personification, as Kurtz deems “horror and moral terror” either an enemy or a friend¹. Through this designation, Coppola invites depth to “horror”: it has a visual component that one can see, “and” it contains emotional, moral, and psychological dimensions. Kurtz even claims that “horror has a face.” As he says this, there is light cast across half of his face, leaving the other half in darkness (2:10:28). This chiaroscuro lighting persists for the rest of the film whenever Willard or Kurtz’s face appears (2:10:58, 2:12:14, 2:16:59, 2:17:33). The metaphor is evident: the viewer can only see one face of war’s horror. The partial concealment of war’s horror — with all its dimensions — is particularly evident as Kurtz recites his final lines, “the horror. The horror” (2:20:14). Coppola utilizes a side profile shot, entirely hiding the left side of Kurtz’s face. Yet, Kurtz repeats the word, as if acknowledging the double-sided nature of horror: there are parts that can be observed, and there are parts that are beyond comprehension for those who do not already know what it “means.” In this way, Coppola dramatizes the impossibility of portraying, in entirety, horror.

¹ The words “enemy” vs. “friend” reproduce the language of war, suggesting that one fights against horror. However, Kurtz also finds that few know what horror “means,” and thus Coppola suggests that few people understand what they are fighting against.

All of this, however, is challenged in the film's final shot. After Willard murdered Kurtz and left the compound, Coppola showcases Willard's painted face turning directly toward the camera, all while Kurtz's dying words echo in the background: "the horror. The horror" (2:26:40). Willard's face then leans into and fades into the stone statue that represents Kurtz's savagery. Coppola layers audio, visual, and editing techniques to produce a multidimensional atmosphere that is, by all means, horrific. The whispers, the sound of rain, the fog, Willard's eye contact, and Willard's melding with the statue altogether amplify an ambiguity and overwhelming sensation that grasp at the atmosphere of horror. The shot is overwhelming, multifaceted — language does little, here, to elucidate the weight of the film, for it relies so heavily on the bodily senses. In this way, Coppola reinforces that understanding "horror" embodies a multidimensional, cumulative experience that extends beyond words or singular images and demands engagement through the immediate senses.

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