

# A Possibility of Mutual Communication: Beyond Agonistic Resignation

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*While we have an impulse to seek mutual understanding, we often encounter something beyond our understanding in others. This essay investigates how we can draw a picture in which both parties are passionately engaged in the conversation. We find crucial factors for it in the film *Stella Dallas*. The first is motherhood and daughterhood in human nature. The second is the unknowability of the daughter's side, which works as an education for a mother. Finally, those factors are activated by the speaker's seriousness. This seriousness can be a justification for the audience to understand the mother's gaze and be educated.*

## INTRODUCTION

When meeting and talking with someone whose cultural background or way of thinking is beyond your understanding, you, intentionally or unintentionally, choose a certain attitude towards them. You may start to struggle to find a clue on which you can base understanding, or you may interrupt them and start to control the conversation with your own way of understanding the world. You may even just give up a conversation. Giving up a conversation does not just include ceasing to talk, but also includes pretending to understand—or to try to understand—what they are saying while you completely stop thinking. In general, it is tough to engage in understanding something far away from your paradigms of thinking. Thus, what is the difference between those who try to be engaged in a conversation and those who do not? What motivates them to stick to mutual understanding?

This is a question which can be explored in a conversation between Mrs. Morrison and Stella in the film *Stella Dallas*. Right after showing her loud clothes with excessive decorations in front of her daughter Laurel, Stella visits Mrs. Morrison's house to ask her to take care of Laurel instead. Sitting next to Mrs. Morrison, Stella starts to verbalise her affection for Laurel and her ideas of a better environment for her. As Standish notes, 'Mrs Morrison's intuition involves the recognition that there is something in Stella that she cannot understand' (Standish, 2004, p. 99). It is not difficult to imagine how deep a gulf Mrs. Morrison feels between them because obviously, Mrs. Morrison and Stella have completely different cultural or social backgrounds. Here, Mrs. Morrison must have several choices of how she treats Stella's confession. In the scene, Mrs. Morrison at least seems to be listening to Stella's story seriously and her behaviour in keeping hold of Stella's hands almost throughout the scene can support the idea that Mrs. Morrison somehow chooses to take her voice to heart. Therefore, we have the same question in this example as given above, namely, what makes Mrs. Morrison engaged in listening to Stella's voice? First, women's communication is discussed as the core of their conversation. We see that women's communication may be mutual because of an exchange of their experiences as mothers and daughters. Second, Stella's otherness is focused on from Mrs. Morrison's perspective. The main issue is whether a mother's gaze is enough to describe the mutual communication between

Stella and Mrs. Morrison. The otherness of Stella, from Mrs. Morrison's perspective, makes a space for mutual education. In the last section, a moral requirement is added to Stella's search for a mother's gaze in order to have a clearer understanding of Morrison's wish for a serious conversation with Stella, while education about Stella's otherness is not enough to satisfy the understanding.

## WOMEN'S COMMUNICATION

There are various types of voices. Here, the term 'voice' means more than just words said aloud. It is greatly related to human selfhood with philosophical depth just as Cavell (1996) shows. Voices are honest, feared, controlled, faked, and confused. Some of them are fully heard and some are neglected and oppressed. In the case of Stella in front of Mrs. Morrison, her voice is honest and fully heard by Mrs. Morrison. Our focus is on why Mrs. Morrison acts in such a way. Cavell claims that communication between women is a key in this point. According to Cavell, while a man is not capable of listening to a woman in spite of an effort to control them, a woman is. In the film, Stephen fails to listen to Stella's voice in his effort to control Stella's taste, but communications between Stella and Laurel, and Stella and Mrs. Morrison, occur. By this distinction between men and women, Cavell does not mean that gender difference explains it. He says:

I have formulated the subject of the melodrama of the unknown woman as the irony of human identity. And I have formulated the narrative drive of the genre as a woman's search for the mother. (Cavell, 1996, p. 210)

It can be suggested that he focuses on human nature in the search for the mother. As Cavell says, Stella enjoys her daughterhood in the search for a mother's gaze, while she is a mother. In the last scene, a window through which Stella sees her daughter's wedding functions as a film screen, which is a tool of women's communication, Cavell suggests. When Stella sees her daughter through the window, she does it as a mother, but Stella is simultaneously gazed at by Mrs. Morrison through the window, which satisfies her own search for a mother's gaze. Mrs. Morrison tells a butler, before the wedding, to keep a curtain open so that Stella can see inside if she comes. This interpretation comes from the previous scene, where Stella visits Mrs. Morrison's house and shows her unselfishness as a mother to Mrs. Morrison. In the scene, it is mainly Stella who speaks and Mrs. Morrison is a total listener. However, the last scene can be regarded as a mutual communication, not a one way one, because we see Mrs. Morrison's choice of keeping a curtain open, which is a response to Stella's voice in the previous visit. Here we may find a clue to answer our question. Cavell says that 'when the daughter is motheringly to her mother both may be comforted ... and mothering may be transmitted. Fathering, for us is not. When the son is fatherly to his father, the father is transcended' (Cavell, 1996, pp. 215-216). Thus, an idea seems possible that Stella's search for a mother's gaze and her daughterhood somehow guides Mrs. Morrison to respond or serve as Stella's mother. This could be Mrs. Morrison's motivation to listen to Stella whole-heartedly.

## BEYOND SOMETHING UN-UNDERSTANDABLE

We have seen that a communication between women can be mutual. Both daughterhood and motherhood in human nature make it possible. However, it is insufficient to describe why Mrs. Morrison can be a sincere listener and an acceptor of Stella's voice. Her daughterhood does not seem enough to explain the deep gulf between them. Here, we have to remember that we see a problem when Standish says Mrs. Morrison sees something beyond her understanding in Stella. If we only have the notion of motherhood and daughterhood to describe Mrs. Morrison's attitude to Stella, it is quite difficult to understand what prevents Mrs. Morrison from denying something she cannot understand. The idea that only Mrs. Morrison's motherhood makes her a perfect listener for Stella makes Mrs. Morrison look like a self-sacrificing mother without her own voice. This picture does not fit with the notion of mutual communication where both equally exchange their voices.

Standish writes about their relationship that:

The blurring of the roles of mother and daughter lays the way for separation, but the mutual acceptance of Stella and Mrs Morrison is such that each learns from the other: Mrs Morrison learns through this strange action of Stella that there is something that she cannot understand but must acknowledge, while Stella finds that this acknowledgement is given. This friend-like relation educates them both. (Standish, 2004, p. 100)

We can learn from this passage that it is Stella's incomprehensible voice, rather than just her daughterhood, that makes their mutual communication possible. It is because something beyond understanding can be an opportunity of education for a listener, that she is motivated to accept Stella's voice. Indeed, Cavell's interpretation says that Stella is on the way to finding her own voice by knowing and turning away from her distaste. In the last scene, 'Stella learns ... that Stella has the right not to share their tastes, that she is free to leave not just the man of the marriage but the consequences of a marriage she allowed herself to believe would transform her' (Cavell, 1996, p. 217). If we have a taste for anything, there must be distaste for something in comparison to the taste. We can know what we understand by knowing what we cannot understand. This unknowability is a key to Mrs. Morrison's sincerity.

However, it should be noted that Saito (2004) criticises Standish in terms of this unknowability. According to her, 'in his over emphasis on unknownness and otherness, Stella's internal process of self-transformation, what Cavell calls her "Soul's journey", tends towards a kind of mystification of the realm of unknowability' (Saito, 2004, p. 84). Although Saito focuses on Stella's finding her own voice, the same can be said about Mrs. Morrison. How do we know that Stella's otherness fully works as an education for Mrs. Morrison, and that she accepts being educated? Thinking in this way, she concludes that it is a mother's gaze, which we have seen above, that helps us to go through a journey to find our own voice. In our case, Mrs. Morrison's gaze is at Stella. Here, we have a problem. If we turn to Mrs. Morrison's motherhood, there is a risk of describing her as just a self-sacrificing mother without her own voice, while Stella's otherness mystifies a detailed process of both having their own voices. Is it possible to practise mutual, serious conversation without mentioning motherhood and unknowability? How can Mrs. Morrison be engaged with Stella's voice without being just a

self-sacrificing mother?

## MORAL REQUIREMENT

Cavell reads Stella's confession to Mrs. Morrison as a journey of her recovering her own voice. In the beginning, Stella desires to be someone unlike her, who suits a man like Stephen. However, through several experiences new to her, such as enjoying high-class society, child rearing and rejection from Stephen, she begins to grasp what is to her taste and what is not. Cavell notes that 'Stella is childish at the end of the resort hotel sequence; then on the train back home she is essentially silent, only recovering her voice again in the subsequent sequence, at Mrs. Morrison's house' (Cavell, 1996, p. 216). Cavell attributes the recovery to Mrs. Morrison's gaze at Stella as a mother, as we have seen above. In this section, the very moment when Stella is about to recover her own voice is picked up as the last step of Mrs. Morrison deciding to perfectly accept Stella.

Cavell sees importance of a journey of finding one's own voice. In the last scene, Stella turns way from the wedding and starts to walk straight towards us. Cavell expresses this scene as:

The ratifying of her insistence on her own taste, that is, of her taking on the thinking of her own existence, the announcing of her cogito ergo sum, happened without—as in Descartes's presenting of it, it happens without—yet knowing who she is who is proving her existence. (p. 219)

Throughout the film, Stella's journey in finding her own voice is quite unsteady. As Cavell points out, the distinction between the activeness and passiveness of her voice, her motherhood and daughterhood, and taste and distaste is always ambiguous, with one replacing the other. Stella is confused regarding her taste or how much her voice is controlled. It is neither true that Stella is oblivious regarding the effect of her dressing, which we can know by taking a closer look at how she chooses to dress in a black dress and 'Christmas tree' (Cavell, 1996), nor that she is always conscious of her taste and her effect on her surroundings. In the scene of Mrs. Morrison's house, Stella is just on the way to finding her own voice. When Stella enters Mrs. Morrison's house and sits, she starts to talk fearfully and haltingly as if she cannot know proper words for expressing what she really wants to say. Once she starts to talk, she physically gets closer to Mrs. Morrison and starts to verbalise what is in her mind more and more eloquently, as if she is finding the proper way of expression. It is obvious that Stella does not just make a ready-made presentation. She is, instead, creating words along with her feelings in the moment and following the reactions of Mrs. Morrison such as an expression of the sense of wonder, guilt, and admiration. I call this the improvisation of a speaker.

The improvisation of a speaker contains moral requirement for a listener. In general, improvisation consumes a lot of the brain's working memory, which means there is no space for faking or deceiving. Therefore, with an improvised performance, people see something sincere and serious through your face, behaviour and voice. In the case of Stella, the way she talks, being bewildered, behaving nervously, asking to take care of her daughter straightforward, and talking about her daughter with rapture, all support the seriousness of her speech.

A listener then realises that any words of denial and authority could oppress and crush the attempt to create words to express what is in one's mind, which is comparable with a journey of

finding one's own voice. This is a moral requirement imposed on a listener. Of course, not everyone is capable of being aware of this moral requirement. If Stephen were in Mrs. Morrison's place, he would not even be aware that Stella's voice was recovering right in front of him, and would interrupt her without any sense of hesitation. In that sense, Mrs. Morrison's motherhood matters as a necessary factor. However, it is not enough. The motherhood of Mrs. Morrison is activated because she consciously or unconsciously knows her motherhood is morally required by Stella. To rephrase, Stella's seriousness and bewilderment almost forces motherhood in Mrs. Morrison.

## CONCLUSION: UNKNOWABILITY, MOTHERHOOD, MORALITY

While we have an impulse to seek mutual understanding, we often find something beyond our understanding in others. Faced with this unknowability, the worst case is that we tune the otherness out and stop thinking. It is valuable to seek a point where we are motivated to take a step towards mutual understanding, or at least acknowledgement. In the film *Stella Dallas*, a conversation between Stella and Mrs. Morrison is a realisation of this. We first see that their motherhood and daughterhood represent a key for mutual communication. Since Stella searches for a mother's gaze, the motherhood in Mrs. Morrison responds to it. However, it is not an explanation that is precise enough for how Mrs. Morrison ends up being engaged in the conversation with someone with this otherness. Second, we see otherness itself can educate both those who have otherness and those who see it. This point of view explains mutuality well. What is left is a detailed process of producing this mutual communication. In this, the importance of Stella's journey of finding her own voice must be stressed. Mrs. Morrison sees that Stella is on the way to finding her own voice, resonating with Mrs. Morrison's response to her. Stella is quite serious about her expression on that journey. This serious speaking morally requires Mrs. Morrison to be a serious listener. Now we have a picture of how a mutual communication occurs, bridging the deep gulf between the two. Mutual communication is possible when there is a resonance between motherhood and daughterhood. A speaker takes the mother's gaze, and a giver also learns something through the otherness of a daughter. The giver participates in this conversation because of the speaker's seriousness, which imposes a moral requirement to pay attention.

## REFERENCES

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