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Language and the Unconscious in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

If language is meant to explain how we truly feel, why is it so difficult to find the right words sometimes? For Alfred J. Prufrock, he finds difficulty to share why he feels so unsatisfied with his life, and cannot articulate his internal disposition. T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” details the stream of consciousness by a young man becoming more and more unfulfilled with his current life. Through Prufrock’s difficulty in explaining how he truly feels, Eliot’s poem reflects Jacques Lacan’s claims that language serves as a barrier in the way of articulating the unconscious desires.

Lacan’s theory of psychoanalysis revolves around the unconscious and the development of language as a means to explain and articulate these unconscious desires within human individuals. Our society seeks to explain our unconscious motives in a way that is “structured like a language” (Pennington and Cordell). This takes place by establishing a relationship between the *signifier*, being the word used in a sentence or a symbol, and its *signified*, which is the actual concept being perceived. As a poet, Eliot employs both the signifier and the signified through the message he intends to send through his poem, and the words he chooses to send this message to the reader.

Despite the efforts that Prufrock is putting in to place his meanings into words in the poem, he finds difficulty in choosing the right metaphor or description of his disposition. Multiple times in the poem, Prufrock gives multiple examples in his effort to explain what he means, such as when he speaks of “the yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes (Eliot 516). Immediately after this line, Prufrock revises his words to explain the matter as “the

yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes” (Eliot 516). There is a similar meaning in signifiers in Prufrock’s language, but his true meaning is lost in translation as he is seeking to find the right signifier to match his signified thoughts. He is filled with anxieties and desires that he cannot put into words, and this lack of available communication makes the resolution of his anxiety even more difficult.

Prufrock eventually becomes aware of the fact that his language and words cannot truly describe his inner desires, mirroring Lacan’s theory. Near the end of the poem Prufrock exclaims that “it is impossible to say just what I mean!” (Eliot 519) This line in Eliot’s poem perfectly embodies Lacan’s interpretation of language. Prufrock explains his discovery that “what is desired and the words used to identify that object of desire are not the same” (Pennington and Cordell), which is precisely what Lacan describes as the downfall of linguistics and their connection to the mind and the unconscious. There is a paradox created through the fact that Prufrock is encouraged as a human to speak his mind, yet he cannot truly ever *speak* what his mind is telling him. He experiences first hand Lacan’s thought that “language is a source of our desire but that language becomes the source of frustrated desire since words can never capture desire or the essence of meaning” (Pennington and Cordell).

Along with a lack of language to describe his unconscious, Prufrock also shows a lack of self-identity which resembles Lacan’s *Mirror Stage*. In trying to find his own identity, Prufrock seeks to understand himself in relation to the others around him, to provide “an image of [him] self, one at first of ideal completeness” (Pennington and Cordell). However, Prufrock’s perception of himself is displaced by the differences he sees in the others around him. His identity is shattered by the lack of resemblance and familiarity that he has of others. This is especially relevant in his statement that “the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo”

(Eliot, 516). Prufrock is upset that women seek a more attractive man like Michelangelo, whereas he cannot find a part of his own identity in that man. By using other people to create an image of himself, Prufrock creates a split between the *moi* and the *je*; a split between his own sense of self and the method in which he can root himself as a person or subject in language. In another line, Prufrock cannot find a similar identity with “Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be” (Eliot, 519). He struggles to come to terms with his own identity, both in language as Lacan describes in the *Mirror Stage*, and in his own comfort with his sense of self.

Prufrock attempts to use language to articulate his repressed desires in his society to little avail. He constantly refers to his self-perception, as he describes himself through the eyes of the others around him. He mimics the voices of insecurity in his head that speak of “how his hair is growing thin” and “how his arms and legs are thin” (Eliot 517). Prufrock constantly questions how he is to live in the real world, outside of his desire. He asks himself, “shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?” (Eliot 520). Prufrock is terrified of the social conventions that he must conform to, and he fears the ways that he must try to fit in. This repression of his own desires by the society around him forces him to constantly analyze his every move. Prufrock feels inadequate in his presentation to others around him, and even in the way that he eats in public. The most pressing part of this inadequacy, however, is that Prufrock cannot find a way to articulate his meaning in the poem. This reflects Lacan’s approach to displacement, that Prufrock is expressing his own repression and anxiety in terms of how the other people around him are viewing him. He is not coming to terms with his repressed self, he just realizes that he is unlike the people around him.

Prufrock’s main desire that he is repressing is his desire for women and love. He is at war with himself over either pursuing a woman or wallowing in his own self-doubt, and the poem

highlights the anxious behaviors and attitudes that occur from this repression. Prufrock is aware that this is not an uncommon occurrence in the people around him. He speaks of his fellow repressed as “hav[ing] lingered in the chambers of the sea/By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown/Till human voices wake us, and we drown” (Eliot 520). His sexual desire is shown in the mermaids that he describes, but in reality he is unable to act on his own desire due to social constraints. Prufrock’s unconscious self is represented by the sea that he feels able to swim in, but the human voices are the manifestation of his conscious self. Prufrock ‘drowns’ in the sea of his desires because social norms have forced him to live outside of his desire, and he spirals out of control by the tension between the unconscious and the conscious.

Both Prufrock’s lack of ability to satisfy his sexual desire and his lack of language to articulate this desire are the basis of the anxiety and fear that he describes in the poem. Lacan’s theory of the unconscious and its displacement through language explains the difficulties experienced in articulating and representing different meanings through writing. Eliot’s poem serves as a beautiful example of this paradox of language, as Prufrock details through the multiple phases of Lacan’s linguistic theories, and gives a face to the manifestation of repression and displacement in literature.

Works Cited

- Pennington, John and Cordell, Ryan. *Writing about Literature through Theory*. 1st ed., FlatWorld, 2013.
- Eliot, T.S. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” *Literature: A Portable Anthology*, by Janet E. Gardner, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2017. Pages 516-520

