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Language and the Unconscious in Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

"And in short, I was afraid" (Eliot 518). T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" details the stream of consciousness by a young man becoming more and more anxious and unfulfilled with his current life, and the frustration that lies within articulating this crisis. Prufrock finds difficulty sharing why he feels so unsatisfied with his life and cannot articulate his internal disposition. From Lacan's psychoanalytic approach, Prufrock discovers and struggles with his inability to find a wholeness of self through language. Through Prufrock's difficulty in explaining how he truly feels, the 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. Language is supposed to be a tool that can articulate the unconscious desires of individuals. Society seeks to explain our unconscious motives in a way that is "structured like a language" (Pennington and Cordell). This explanation of motives 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. Language tends to value the signifier (word) over the signified (feeling), which in turn diminishes the meaning of what is truly in the unconscious. Lacan states that language cannot fully accommodate all that exists in the unconscious, and therefore words cannot fully express every desire a human may have. As a poet, Eliot employs both the signifier and the signified through the message he intends to send through his poem, and in the words he chooses to send this message to the reader.

Despite the effort that Prufrock puts in to use signifiers to explain his signified desires, he finds difficulty in choosing the right metaphor or word to explain his disposition. Prufrock struggles with the gap between language and his own unconscious. Multiple times in the poem, Prufrock gives examples of 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 between the signifiers in Prufrock’s language, but the true meaning of his thoughts are 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. This difficulty in finding a signifier for his simplest thoughts proves to be even more problematic when Prufrock has to describe his own self-concept.

Part of Prufrock’s identity crisis revolves around his repression of desire for women and love. His desire to find women is displayed in the opening line of the poem as he asks “Let us go then, you and I/When the evening is spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherized upon a table” (Eliot 516). He is planning how to ask a woman out on a date, but the rest of the poem details his frustration with himself. Prufrock lacks the confidence to ask the woman to be with him. Thus, his desire is repressed due to his inability to act. 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, who are surrounding him and who are described as “wreathed”, or clothed, in different colors. However, he is unable to act on his own desire due to social constraints. His desire is the “chambers of the sea,” but society requires him to be above ground. Society, or the “human voices” wake him out of his fantasy and force him to adjust to social standards. Thus, Prufrock “drowns” in the sea of his desires since social norms have forced him to live outside of his desire. Rather than pursuing his desires, he wallows in the shattering of his own identity instead. He spirals out of control by this tension between the unconscious and the conscious.

Prufrock attempts to use language to articulate his identity crisis 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). Along with insecurities, these statements are also used to try and signify Prufrock’s fear of growing old and dying. His confidence seems to deteriorate as he is growing older. 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 is becoming more and more aware of how he is losing confidence and youth as he has “known the evenings, mornings, afternoons/I have measured my life out with coffee spoons” (Eliot 517). The most pressing part of this inadequacy, however, is that Prufrock cannot find a way to fully articulate this crisis 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 also tries to explain his crisis in identity by using metaphors and language of who he is not. If he cannot articulate who he is, maybe he can articulate who he is not. Since he cannot articulate the bad aspects that he contains, he attempts to articulate the good aspects that he lacks instead. 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. In another line, Prufrock cannot find a similar identity with “Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be” (Eliot 519). Prufrock seeks to describe the self-concept that he truly wants to have, but he cannot articulate the true details of this ideal man. Instead, he must rely on metaphors like Michelangelo or Hamlet to try to articulate his case. 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. He is aware that he cannot find out who he truly is, and he is tired of other trying to figure him out as he states that he has “known the eyes already, known them all/ The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase” (Eliot 518). The eyes represent the society that “fixes” the person into a phrase that can explain their whole identity. The “formulated phrase” is the signifier in Prufrock’s case, yet he believes that his identity must extend beyond a simple collection of words. He struggles to come to terms with his own identity through language, as Lacan describes in the *Mirror Stage*, and in his own comfort with his sense of self.

Prufrock eventually becomes aware of the fact that the signifier and signified cannot ever be truly equal, mirroring Lacan's theory. He will never have the correct words to say what he really feels inside. Near the end of the poem Prufrock exclaims that "it is impossible to say just what I mean!" (Eliot 519) Prufrock cannot explain that his identity is shattered. 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 its 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). Prufrock's dependence on language to describe his unconscious shows the shattering of his own identity, depicting Lacan's *Mirror Stage*. In trying to find his own identity, Prufrock seeks to understand himself in relation to the language of others around him, to provide "an image of [him] self, one at first of ideal completeness" (Pennington and Cordell).

Both Prufrock's lack of ability to identify himself and his lack of language to articulate this problem 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

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