



Living Through the Borders of the Illusory Real: The Psychological Interpretation of Joyce's *A Painful Case* in the Context of Lacan's Theories

Aliye Mohammad Jafari^{[a],*}; Fatemeh Pourjafari^[b]

^[a] Department of English Language, Anar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Anar, Iran.

^[b] Department of English Language, Kerman Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

The Lacanian reading of *A Painful Case* provides a foundation for James Joyce's characterization. It explains clearly some details within the story which reveal the fact that the reason behind Mr. Duffy's engagement in an ideal fantasy world is his obsession with "ideal ego". This essay aims at reading *A Painful Case* – a short story from *Dubliners* – through employing terminology from Lacanian psychoanalysis. It will show how the protagonist's interactions, reactions and in general life style is affected by the intricate tensions between his experience of the imaginary order, the symbolic order and the Real.

Key words: James Joyce; *A Painful Case*; Psychoanalysis; Lacan

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INTRODUCTION

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) is the Freudian theorist who rewrote Freud's psychological principles many years after Freud, and tried to give a more vivid picture of the construction of the human psyche. He dealt with the crucial questions in regard with the human subject, the formation of the self, his unconscious desires and

the consequences of his arrival to society. However, Lacan's name is more a reminder of his well – known comparison between the human structure of the unconscious and language. This definition is the joint between psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, and emphasizes the fact that the unconscious like language – "is composed less of signs – stable meanings – than of signifiers" (Eagleton, 2008, p. 146). This principle is regarded as the basic framework of Lacan's theories which has provided the capability for his psychoanalytical theories to be expanded and applied into various fields such as philosophy, psychology, literary criticism, and even sociology and politics.

In this article, it is intended first to discuss Lacan's basic principles of the subject's psychological growth. For this purpose, the three significant concepts, "the imaginary order", "the symbolic order" and "the Real" will be taken particularly into consideration. Finally, the applicability of those Lacanian concepts on the literary texts will be evaluated through a critical review of the well – known short story *A Painful Case* by James Joyce.

LACAN AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL GROWTH OF THE SUBJECT

On the basis of Lacan's principles, the subject goes through a process of psychological growth in order to reach a unified self and fill the gap within his essential dis – unified and split self. Lacan shows that the subject undergoes three stages, namely "The mirror stage", "the imaginary state" and "the symbolic order" through the process of the psychic growth. These stages are interrelated and the subject may not experience one without feeling the existence or the effects of other stages. In other words, they shape the framework from which the subject experiences the world and gets in touch with its events (Fink, 1995).

Lacan used the term imaginary order, in order to describe the subject's understanding of the world around and its position in it, as an infant. It is because of the abundance of the childish images with which it identifies that Lacan calls this stage "The imaginary". It is the time that the subject recognizes itself as unified with all the objects around and in this way, it experiences a "fictive sense of unitary selfhood by finding something in the world with which it can identify" (Eagleton, 2008, p. 143).

This dependency and shapelessness ends with the subject's arrival to what Lacan calls "the mirror stage". This stage of psychological growth begins when the child sees his/her own image in the mirror. Lacan believes that this identification is a mere misperception and the child who assumes that it has found its unified self, would learn later that what he sees in the mirror is just an image, a reflection – not the real self. This movement from fragmentation to totality is the beginning of the formation of the ego. It should be noted that "this identification is crucial, as without it... the infant would never get to the stage of perceiving him/herself as a complete or whole being" (Homer, 2005, p. 24).

The illusion of oneness with mother is completely shattered when the child arrives at "the symbolic order", during which significant changes happen in the psychological life of the subject. Simultaneously, it notices the presence of the father and becomes aware of the existence of more complex relations at home, than what it previously supposed. Father symbolizes the impossibility of the possession of the mother's body which means the impossibility of filling the split within the dis-unified ego. Father and language means the completion of the process of separation. From now on, the name of the father whose presence rules over the symbolic order represents all the social norms, standards, cultural elements and laws which are agents of the patriarchal society to defend the social order and authority. As Lacan expresses: "It is in the name of the father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which from the dawn of history has identified his person with the figure of the law" (1977, p. 67).

Absence and lack are the "realities" of the social life, but Lacan indicates the existence of another inaccessible realm of psychic experience by the name of "the Real", which includes these realities which are not reachable, neither expressible. As the subject leaves the imaginary and enters the symbolic order and loses all its connections with the mother's body, its connection and interaction with "the Real" end by his use of language. In other words, the inaccessibility of the Real is due to its being inexpressible by language. Lacan calls the real the source of utter plenitude, wholeness, unity and fullness and as far as lack or absence does not find a way in the real, there is no language in the Real (Lacan, 1980, pp. 179-221).

DISCUSSION

A Painful Case is a short story from the collection of 15 short stories, *Dubliners*, written by James Joyce in the early years of the 20th century. It tells the story of a middle – aged bank cashier named Mr. Duffy who leads a solitary life in suburb of Dublin.

The immediate question to be answered after reading the first paragraph of the story is over the reasons of Mr. Duffy's isolation. Such statements as wishing "to live as far as possible from the city of which he was a citizen" (Joyce, 2000, p. 77), and finding "all the other suburbs of Dublin mean, modern and pretensions" (p. 77), emphasize a sort of self-willed isolation. Every reader of Joycean literature is well aware of the fact that the settings of the stories in *Dubliners* are a naturalistic depiction of the Irish society and the paralysis it suffered as a result of various forces such as the political dominance of England, poverty and the overwhelming authority of the Irish Catholic Church. This symbolic order according to a Lacanian approach is a patriarchal society, dominated by the name-of-the-father as the only agent of issuing and fixing law. What happens to the subjectivity and selfhood of the subjects in such a context is a painful tragedy, for a normal psychological growth is almost impossible in a domain where the dominant ideology has the absolute right to interpret the signifiers on the basis of its own limited and fixed range of signified and stereotypes. The characteristic of the symbolic order would be more vivid through such descriptions as the identification of the shallow river with the shallowness of the inhabitants of that city. However, Mr. Duffy has broken a way from such a society and refuses to mix with its people. He believes in a high image of himself and has stuck to it that avoids anything that may shatter its stability. This is what Lacan calls in his *Écrits* (1980) the ideal ego "and is formed during the mirror stage, a central moment in the subject's development. The child identifies with his own image and forms the ideal ego which is at the same time both necessary and dangerous. It is necessary because it is considered to be significant for the subject's entrance into other stages of psychological development. One should reach an understanding of his "self" and subjectivity, before finding himself in the larger social scale of the symbolic order in which this "self" finds meaning by interactions with others. On the other hand, it is dangerous because this creation of an ideal "I" during the mirror stage may remain in the subject and assert its effect on him when he moves to other stages of development and even after he is a fully developed subject. This is what many psychologists, among them Lacan, calls narcissism. As Terry Eagleton (2008) clarifies, the subject's first perceptions of an "I" by misrecognizing his own mirror image as his real self is essentially narcissistic. As the

child grows up, this process of identification with objects as mirrors that can reflect an actually illusory full selfhood to us, continues (p. 143).

In all of these searches, identifications and substitutions of objects, one thing is the center of focus: the self. This is why the formation of ego is considered to be narcissistic in nature. However while the objects will substitute this mirror image later during the years of psychological development, a narcissist sticks to this primary selfhood or "ideal ego" and avoids anything or any relation which tend to destroy that fake unified self image. Mr. Duffy has created such an ideal ego for himself and believes in its properness to the extent that does not mix with others for the fear of losing it. Instead of entering the social life and becoming a dynamic member of the symbolic order, he has created an autonomous symbolic order for himself in which there exists no threat from the outside world to this "narcissistic investment in self" (Garry Martin, 1956, p. 213). "The uncarpeted room, free from picture", with its few objects and furniture is the absolute result of his choice: "He himself bought every article of furniture in it" (p. 18). The territory has remained in tact and the ego is approved. The low thickness of the Maynooth Catechism is another sign for Mr. Duffy's ignorance of the established rules and traditions of the symbolic order. Nevertheless it should be taken into account that Mr. Duffy has not been isolated all his life. He told her that for some time he had assisted at the meetings of an Irish Socialist party where he had felt himself a unique figure (p. 79). He could not get along with the working members of the party for the simple reason that they did not approve of his ideal ego, each searching for an object – here money – to fill the original lack within himself. This contrasted his long-held belief in the completeness of his self-sufficient ego, and the futility of the desire for any other object because the only object to be desired was his own image. His uniqueness was not confirmed there. As a result, "he had discontinued his attendances" (p. 79), and freed himself from the anxiety of being identified with the mean members of the symbolic order he has isolated himself from, whose altitude of happiness meant no more than the possession of wealth, furniture, and simple objects of life. In his illusion, he has reached the ever desired Real, which is almost always inaccessible, and is enjoying that ideal unification of the self. Nothing is more significant to him beyond keeping this illusory wholeness so that he even checks himself, all the time, not to step beyond the boundaries he has recognized for himself: "He lived at a little distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side glances. He had an autobiographical habit which led him to compose in his mind from time to time short sentence about himself containing a subject in the third person and a predict in the past" (pp. 77-78). Lacan believes in an "alter ego" in parallel with the "Ideal ego" which is the production of the subject's interactions within

the symbolic order. The harmony between the narcissistic image of the self (ideal ego) a product of the mirror stage, and our social being (alter ego), brings us the sense of happiness in life. "It is the symbolic relation which defines the position of the subject as seeing. It is speech, the symbolic relation, which determines the greater or lesser degree of perfection, of completeness..." (Lacan, 1980, p. 141).

It is understood that the established subjectivity of the imaginary order is to be filled and grown through the interactions with others in the symbolic order. As far as Mr. Duffy has chosen an isolated life, this "other" to be identified with, is himself. He has to check this other and the self all the time to be ensured of their correspondence, which is in turn the cause of his illusory happiness. However, an encounter with an "other", other than himself, begins to threaten this narcissistic peace: "one evening he found himself sitting beside two ladies in the Rotunda" (p. 78) and one of these ladies, Mrs. Sinico, turns to be a subject of attention to him. The mechanism of love for Lacan clarifies their relation, by emphasizing the fact that love is a means for perfection, because it has the structure of the "self", and attempts to identify with the ideal ego and fill the lacks within the self. "Love is a phenomenon which takes place on the imaginary level and which provokes a veritable subduction of the symbolic, a sort of annihilation, or perturbation of the function of the ego-ideal. Love reopens the door... to perfection" (Lacan, 1980, p. 142).

In fact the role that Mrs. Sinico plays in this mutual relation is to approve of Mr. Duffy's ego and confirm his ideas about himself. This is emphasized through the story by such statements as: "she became his confessor", "she listened to all", "Her companionship was like a warm soil about an exotic" and "He thought that in her eyes he would ascend to an angelical stature" (pp. 79-80).

For the period of time that they meet, she acts as a listener, the "other" reflects his image, like a mirror a proof for which he imagines himself to be, and finally that "third person" which is at the same time a part of, and separated from his ego. The moment this role is disturbed by the woman's sign of love, he feels his autonomous realm to be threatened by an "other"/"object a", the existence of which he asserts for the first time. On the other hand the woman sees in Mr. Duffy her lost object, the agent of self – unification, by whose presence she can experience the desired happiness. Ironically, Duffy is acting as Mrs Sinico's ideal ego, and this is why she is broken when Duffy cuts off by resorting to his loneliness again. By taking his hand passionately, she actually reasserts herself as an autonomous identity who desires to be recognized as an independent self other than being a mirror to approve Mr. Duffy's image of himself. In fact, her role as a "confessor" to Mr. Duffy does not originate from mere interest in what he says. She sees in him an ego

ideal with whom she can restore her deeply split self and gratify her desire to fill the psychic lack. It is interesting that Mr. Duffy and Mrs. Sinico act as ego ideals for one another but unfortunately none of them is successful in satisfying either him/her self or the other.

As Duffy reads the newspaper report of Sinico's death, his first reaction is disgust towards his "soul's companion" (p. 83). He now feels satisfaction over his decision to cut the relationship. He didn't let her to take the place of the "other" (his own image – "the third person" subject of his memories) that he had wed his ego with.

Duffy, for the first time in their relation is recognizing her loneliness and desire to be recognized as a woman by other's gaze. This is the moment of epiphany for him when he is finally able to see Mrs. Sinico not as a mirror to reflect his ideal image but as something "other": "something other was watching him all the time he imagined that he was looking at himself" (Garry martin, 1956, p. 226). This late self-recognition ruins all the presumptions that he had established about himself: his "self" as the "other" which was isolated from the symbolic order and the gaze of others in order to remain in the illusory Real domain is shattered now.

Death is what Mrs. Sinico best deserved and loneliness, the fact that Mr. Duffy reached to at the end; a loneliness which differs from the isolation he had provided for himself as a sign of his own superiority and self-sufficiency. "He felt that he was alone" (p. 84).

CONCLUSION

The Lacanian Real, that state of nature as a time of fullness and completeness, is lost for Joyce's protagonist by his arrival into the symbolic order, represented through Dublin's paralysis.

Instead of submitting to the name-of-the-father, the set of laws that function as the controlling agent of the social life, he retreats into the self-created symbolic order of his isolation and enjoys his imaginary completeness over there. This feeling of being a unified whole is

illusory because it is narcissistic in nature. Duffy's primary experience of the imaginary order and mirror stage has turned to be the basis for his later egotism. His image of his own self has become a compensation for his sense of the original lack and formed an ideal ego to him. Although he doesn't let this fantasy image to be shattered or substituted by others, his involvement in a romantic relation destroys this illusory happiness. Although *A Painful Case* seems to be the tragic story of Mr Duffy, the Lacanian analysis of the character's psychology demonstrates the pitiful woman who was considered to be nothing more than a mirror to confirm Mr. Duffy's ideal ego and who had found in the man, the lost object to fill her primordial lack.

Looking at the story from this angle reminds the reader again of the complex relations and interactions between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real in creating the tensions of our psychodynamic selves.

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