



# Understanding Actions and Motives: The Ideal ‘I’ and Signifiers in Lacanian Psychoanalysis

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**Abstract**— *The Mirror Stage (1949) and The Formation of the Unconscious (1957) by Jacques Lacan are important concepts in the field of Psychoanalysis. This paper understands the arguments put forth in the concepts and concludes their importance in literary criticism. They also help determine the factors that influence Lacan’s theories. Through this paper, we understand the argument of The Mirror Stage, its role in literary criticism and analyze The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) in context to The Mirror Stage. Later we look at the Formation of the Unconscious, its structure similar to that of the language, and the role of signifiers in the human psyche.*

**Keywords**— *Mirror Stage, Unconscious, Signifiers, Psychoanalysis, Structural Linguists.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Mirror Stage (1949) and The Formation of the Unconscious (1957) by Jacques Lacan are lectures given by Lacan accessible to us in published versions. These concepts describe two crucial events in a child’s development that help determine and explain the motive, action, fears and desires of the person in the later stages of life. These concepts fall under and have immensely contributed to the field of Psychoanalysis as they help determine an individual’s personality and revolve around the formations of the unconscious mind. The Mirror Stage specifically looks at the infant’s process of self-recognition which creates a lack in it that it tries to fulfil throughout his life. The Making of the Unconscious determines how the unconscious is related to language, its role in the functioning of the human psyche and the repressed thoughts.

## II. THE MIRROR STAGE

In his lecture on The Mirror Stage, Lacan looks at this stage as a crucial stage of development in a child’s growth where the child can identify with the self and form a

demarcation between the self and the other objects. This stage according to Lacan is crucial because, before this stage, the child is in the Real stage and post the Mirror Stage, the lifelong process of identifying self in terms of the other starts.

He builds his argument by stating that an individual is never aware of who is completely is. There are elements of him that he is completely unaware or unconscious of. He argues that what one knows about self is not the complete subject but only a part of it that is the ego. Ego, thus, according to Lacan is the identity a part of the whole subject that one is aware of. He then argues that from birth till about 18 months, the infant’s sense of self and ‘wholeness’ is absent. The identification process of the infant starts between 6-18 months where the child first sees an image in the mirror and thinks of itself as “I” in relationship with an image that it start to understand as representing itself. This is the first time that the baby discovers itself as a unitary being and thus attains the first realization of his bodily autonomy before which it was driven by needs and lived in unity with his/her mother. This realization is a source of joy and excitement for the child which he wishes to share with others and does that

with an adult present (typically/usually the mother). Sharing this joy is a part of its self-recognition.

Lacan further states that "...we have to understand The Mirror Stage as an identification...the transformation takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" which infers that the infant's discovery of self is an intellectual activity as it not only involves the translation of an image into an idea of 'me' or 'self' but also the identification of something from which it is separated. Thus, it is as an 'other' that the subject first identifies and experiences itself. Hence, the process of identity formation is emotional as it is a source of joy for the infant, intellectual because it involves translating an image into an idea and schismatic because the subject is separated from itself into an object. Lacan argues that the intellectual perception of self is an alienating experience as the child understands that the image is not a real person and it experiences itself wholly as a unified being through the unreality of the image that contrasts with the immobility of the infant.

Lacan thus through the Mirror Stage concludes that human beings are largely oblivious of their subject and it is the ego that they are aware of. The function of the ego as explained above is misrecognition, of refusing to accept the truth of fragmentation and alienation. Lacan insists that ego provides a fictitious coherence to one's identity and the real 'I' is the subject that is hidden by conscious thought about itself.

### 2.1 Literary Criticism and Mirror Stage

From the inferences drawn above, the function of The Mirror Stage is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality. For identity formation, the infant must encounter its reflection and identify with it but also realize that it is not the real self. This realization creates a sense of lack that one experiences for a lifetime. It is the impossibility of the desire to fulfil this lack explored in the texts through the studies of literary criticism and psychoanalysis. It helps the reader understand the motives behind the actions and why certain characters are privileged than the others in context to the author imposing that desire on the character to fulfil it.

### 2.2 *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) by Oscar Wilde can be analysed critically in context to the Lacanian Psychoanalysis and specifically The Mirror Stage. In this novel, the protagonist Dorian Gray is concerned with the transient nature of beauty and youth by witnessing a portrait of himself. He wishes to transform himself into the ideal other, thus curses and desires that his defects manifest in the picture leaving him perfect. This novel aptly describes the powerful influence of viewing one's image as

Lacan describes in his theory of the image being illusionary in giving a sense of wholeness that contrasts with the fragmented self-realization of the child, making the image his rival and the Ideal-I that he aspires to be. In this story, this ideal-I works as a catalyst of Dorian's moral descent. On viewing the portrait the first time, he becomes amazed by his looks and is willing to barter them for his soul to maintain the ideal eternally. This leads him to a life of sin and hedonism but with a lack of satisfaction because it is impossible to measure up to this ideal-I. It results in spurring of negative emotions, anger and a constant sense of lack. His beauty becomes eternal but his moral downfall is visible in his actions. Dorian Gray thus becomes the perfect subject for the representation of Lacanian ideas, the picture of him is the reflected image in the mirror which cannot portray his vice and unstable personality which is visible to the readers. His repressed desires are portrayed through his action but he fails at fulfilling the lack he experiences and this eventually kills him.

## III. THE MAKING OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

Jacques Lacan believed that the characteristic that sets human beings apart from other species of living creatures is language and thus he formulated his theory around the formation of the unconscious and its structuring like language. He built his argument with the simple fact that if language is what makes us human, then the fundamentals of the human psyche are to be found in language too. He hypothesised a structural mirroring between what we say, the way we think and the way our brain is organized and he stated that this also applies to the unconscious. For Lacan, the unconscious is comprised of symbolic elements linked to the fact that we are speaking beings and express ourselves through language, he built the central pillar of his theory, "the unconscious is structured like a language."

He furthers his argument by stating that it is the unconscious that the subject represses and thus it is not consciously expressible by the subject but it constantly manifests itself in the form of dreams, slips of the tongue and other pathological symptoms. These manifestations, Lacan says, are the 'discourse of the unconscious' because they show the structure of the language. Lacan observed in his patients that even their conscious speech obeyed a hidden structure that is their omissions, forgettings, repetitions etc. contained the discourse of the unconscious. This made him reflect upon the constitution of the unconscious that manifest such language-like structure and he approached this question through the theoretical tools developed by the linguists. This is where Lacan's theories draw a connection between the Structural Linguists and Psychoanalysis.

### 3.1 Structural Linguistics and Psychoanalysis

According to Saussure, the fundamental building block of language is the sign which is a combination of not a name and thing rather of a sound image and a concept. This led him to talk about the signifiers and the signifieds because he wished to analyze the composition of linguistic sign in the primary form in which human beings first access it that is the speech. He was acquainted with the psychological nature of the process and thus the signifier rather than being a material sound was the hearer's psychological imprint of the sound and signified was the idea of the object and not the object itself. Signified, therefore, is the concept and signifier is the acoustic image.

Freud had pointed out the fact that emotions affect themselves not to meanings but to 'vorstellungrepräsentanzen' that is the ideational representatives. In Lacan's theory, the equivalent of this idea is the 'emotional load attached to signifiers' and not the signified. Lacan observed that the patients' words often escaped the intentions resulting in the observation that the connection between signifiers is greater than between signifiers and signifieds. Lacan thus highlighted the primacy of the signifier in the human psyche by rewriting Saussure's model of sign in the form of the quasi-algebraic sign as

$$\begin{array}{c} S \text{ (Signifier)} \\ \text{—} \\ \text{(Signified)} \end{array}$$

Through this, Lacan emphasises how the signified inevitably slips beneath the signifier and the bar represents the resistance to the meaning inherent in language. He conveys that meaning doesn't simply appear but involves the act of crossing the bar to produce meaning. Lacan, here opposed the idea of Freud that a baby is simply a set of drives and physical needs. He postulates that an infant is born with the potential of thinking and displays a kind of proto-thinking from the earliest days. The infant forms concepts and recognizes the change in the environment, understands comfort/discomfort, absence/presence, forms the idea of the mother, etc. Likewise, all the signifieds have proto-signifiers for the infant, waiting for signifiers designated by language to get attached to them. Before this happens, signifieds can be thought of as unexpressed concepts. Language thus allows the infant to express concepts within a socially recognised structure. The moment the child begins to formulate its thoughts in language, there is a possibility of the creation of the unconscious.

### 3.2 Signifiers and the human psyche

For Lacan, there are only signifiers in the unconscious. If an unbearable thought occurs to the child, the psychic apparatus suppresses the signifier with which the thought was formulated. If the unconscious consisted of signifieds, then the meaning of a particular signifier would become rigid for a subject and the signifier would remain attached to one particular thing along with the emotional load that it carries. In this case, a signifier once repressed would become irretrievable. The repressed content is usually a configuration of signifiers and the signifier itself is accessible in the other contexts. This primary repression creates an aspect of the psyche namely the unconscious. This is how according to the Lacanian theory, the unconscious is structured like language and once it is formed, the signifiers may become their independent phonetic elements recombining with new signifiers forming the signifying chains. The elements in the unconscious are the signifiers that represent one's desires, fears etc.

## IV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, Lacan and his theories of psychoanalysis have a high influence of Surrealism upon them as Salvador Dali suggests that Lacan obtains his images through a 'clearly paranoid process.' Apart from that Lacan's theories are also influenced by his interest in philosophy, psychology and the very evident influence of Linguistic and Structuralism, the theories of sign, signifier and signified by Saussure. The Mirror Stage has influences of philosophy and determines the reason behind the actions, motives of the character and also helps relate to the author's perspective and the imposing of his/her wishes on the characterization. The Formation of the Unconscious is highly influenced by Saussure's theories that look after the constitution of the unconscious and the relation of repressed desires, human psyche to the signifiers.

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