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Say What?: The Power of Language and Communication Demonstrated in Chuck Palahniuk's Lullaby

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Say *What?*: The Power of Language and Communication Demonstrated in Chuck Palahniuk's *Lullaby*

Abstract:

Throughout *Lullaby*, Palahniuk manipulates traditional communication by obscuring the roles of speaker and recipient with the culling song, a poem that causes instant death to those who hear it. Despite the obvious incorporation of magic and fantasy, the novel reflects genuine aspects of linguistic functions and indicates authentic applications for the use of language and speech acts in the actual process of communication. The author highlights the impact that language bears upon one's psyche, as individuals' thoughts often transpire into words, and consequentially, into threatening actions that jeopardize others' well-being.

Palahniuk's manipulation of traditional communication is that victims do not actually have to hear the culling song for it to enact its murderous effects, hereby destroying the assumption that ignorance is bliss and further reiterating the significance of being able to accurately interpret speakers' language and intentions. Although no texts in actuality will produce effects as extreme as causing instant death to language recipients, *Lullaby* highlights the importance of reader discretion regarding textual purposes, intentions, and implications regarding linguistic communication to avoid misreading, misinterpreting, and misunderstanding.

Keywords: communication, magic, language, information, Palahniuk

Introduction

For most people, language represents the primary method of communicating with others, whether the medium of the language is spoken, written, signed, as in American Sign Language, or implied, as when using nonverbal gestures and cues to either drop hints or share a laugh with another individual regarding an inside joke. People utilize language as the primary transmitter of information, either to tell stories, give directions, teach lessons, clarify instructions, and provide descriptions using words as representations, such as when explaining physical or emotional feelings. Not surprisingly, Arthur L. Blumenthal declares that "most human activity employs language" (1), and Stuart Chase identifies language as "the most human of all human attributes" (352) and classifies it as a "tool" (Chase 19) for thinking and developing new knowledge. As this description conveys the process by which learning occurs, language conceivably represents the most essential aspect of the human condition.

Likewise, as words constitute the basis of language itself, words, then, may also be considered 'tools' that aid the process of communication. In order to communicate linguistically with others, individuals utilize a system of words, sentences, mechanical structures, and grammatical conventions that convey meaning to help others understand their messages and, in turn, produce intended effects from these exchanges.

By the very act of communication, or the act of utilizing language in order to participate in the delivery and/or exchange of information, however, both speakers¹ and recipients² become subject

¹For the purposes of addressing both oral and written types of language and communication, the term *speaker* will be used to refer to both speakers and writers of language. In other words, it will be used to refer to the

to the possibility of misunderstanding, misinterpreting, and misusing language. One's choices of diction and syntax, the two largest aspects of language, play the most significant roles in determining the success (or lack thereof) of communication exchanges. Successful communication depends predominantly on the purposes of the communication (such as promoting oneself professionally when speaking with a potential supervisor during a job interview or when describing physical symptoms to a doctor, for example), the intentions of the communication (to get a new job or promotion or receive a medical diagnosis), and the particular recipient's interpretation and response to the language. As Chase remarks, "when people can agree on the thing to which their words refer, minds meet [and] the communication line is cleared" (9). When all individuals involved in the particular communication process arrive on the same page with regards to the meanings, connotations, and intentions of the language in use, the communication is generally considered successful, as all parties have clearly understood the messages being spoken and have been understood by everyone else receiving these messages.

When everyone involved in the particular exchange of information fails to achieve this understanding, however, communication then becomes unsuccessful. Although unsuccessful linguistic interactions may be attributed to any given number of factors, including hearing disabilities, illiteracy in the particular language being utilized, or ineffective diction, such as vagueness and strong use of slang or other ambiguous connotations, the ultimate reason for communication failure lies within discrepancies between recipients' interpretations of the speaker's messages, and in misinterpretations of speakers' essential intentions.

Regardless of the depth of an individual's concern for their communication skills, the individualized nature of language, such as with a single word's different connotative associations and slang terms, and the varying intentions of its use, makes language susceptible to manipulation, exploitation, and other types of abuse. J. L. Austin observes that the very act of "saying something will... normally produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the [recipients], or of the speaker, or of other persons" (101). This sphere of linguistic vulnerability transforms language from what Francisco Collado-Rodríguez identifies as "a tool that everybody acquires for the apparently innocent purpose of communication" (628) into a type of linguistic abuse in order to execute spiteful, sadistic, and even malicious purposes.

In addressing the concept of abusing, manipulating, misinterpreting, and distorting language, Alexander Tsesis mentions that "religion has been misused in many cultures to spread intolerant hatred. The institution of slavery was justified on the basis of religious ideology, and Islamic extremism continues to foment modern terrorism" (205-6). Just as careful and thorough studying to understanding concepts and master lesson objectives proves essential for learning in academic settings, understanding the meanings of religious doctrines derived from sacred texts requires meticulous and precise studying, as misinterpretations yield the potential for disastrous results, when these misunderstood ideas become perpetuated among numerous people throughout subsequent generations. Another example of language abuse involves the deliberate misuse of diction, in which select words are strategically assembled, manipulated, and transformed into "catalysts for oppression" (Tsesis 206) by vicious speakers to purposefully offend, anger, embarrass, and/or defame the language recipients in order to satisfy vindictive and often malevolent intentions.

All of the purposes and intentions that language fulfills reveal it as a powerful aspect of information exchange, as well as an important means of creating knowledge, developing intellect, and establishing relationships. Consequentially, language embodies capabilities to satisfy positive

individual responsible for either creating or vocalizing the language and the one who instigates linguistic exchanges and communicative interactions.

²The term *recipient* includes all parties to whom language is spoken, either directly or indirectly, those for whom the language is intended, and those who hear the language used in communicative exchanges, either intentionally or unintentionally.

purposes with benevolent intentions, such as when a lover proposes marriage or when a parent says *I love you* to his or her child, as well as contains the potential to serve dangerous purposes and wicked intentions, as demonstrated through insults, racial slurs, manipulation of one individual by another, and premeditated murder plots. Tthesis identifies hate speech as an example of this negative language use and explains that language "intended to elicit violent responses... can be dangerous both at the time it is uttered and in the future" (204). Similarly, Chase pinpoints language as "the mightiest weapon in the arsenal of despots and demagogues" (21). With many instances in which language represents the guiding force in instigating dangerous interactions, such as violent protests, gunfights, and wars, Tthesis fittingly observes that "there is a continuum of... antagonism that starts with hateful speech" (204). Indeed, language represents a powerful means by which individuals develop ideas, shape their beliefs, establish their perceptions, and, in many cases, distort language in order to satisfy their own misunderstood perspectives, stereotypes, and inadequately-informed judgments.

Language and Literature, Language and Reality: Chuck Palahniuk's *Lullaby*

Both positive and negative uses of language become evident when examining past and present-day literature, music, television programs, court trials and legal interrogations, religious and political propaganda, personal and professional correspondence, and, the most modern medium of language transmission, social media and electronic communication, including e-mails, text messages, and video interactive programs like *Skype*, *Snapchat*, and *Hangout*. Chuck Palahniuk addresses the reality of constant influential language infiltration and media exposure, as well as metaphorically demonstrates the many functions of language throughout his novel, *Lullaby*. Despite the novel's incorporation of impractical elements of fantasy (spells, a supernatural book, and characters possessing immortal powers) and impossible circumstances that only manifest (and resolve, for that matter) because of magic, rendering it obviously fictitious in genre, the protagonist's, narrator Carl Streator, destructive use of the seemingly innocent culling song throughout the novel and his interactions with other characters reveal several truths about the use of language in reality.

Throughout *Lullaby*, Palahniuk creates a similar language-infused reality for narrator Carl Streator, whose oral reading of an allegedly harmless 'culling song' results in the mass murder of people with whom he comes in contact and, ultimately, transforms him into a murderer. This corruption manifests despite Streator's obvious struggle to maintain his ethics and limit his use of the culling song to instances similar to that of melodramatic vigilante justice, such as when he declares to "only ever use it for good" (Palahniuk 58). Streator, nonetheless, yields to the power that he possesses with the culling song and converts his sense of ethics into more of a distant afterthought, rather than the beliefs that comprise his moral fiber. While language and its many purposes, functions, speakers, intentions, and recipients are found virtually everywhere, many people, like Carl Streator and his initial reading of the culling song, remain unaware of the powers and potential for danger that language harbors. In many instances, once they realize the dangers of linguistic abuse, the consequential damage has already been done, and the results are often beyond the possibility of repair for both the speaker *and* recipient(s) of the language.

To assume that Streator is unaware of the power of language is an inaccurate assessment, because he comments that "in a world where vows are worthless, where making a pledge means nothing, where promises are made to be broken, it would be nice to see words come back into power" (Palahniuk 60). He contradicts this notion, rightfully so, when he asserts that "sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can hurt like hell" (Palahniuk 74). Streator's awareness of linguistic power becomes evident in his despise of the media's linguistic saturation, which he criticizes in his recurring observations that "Big Brother... [is] making sure your imagination withers... no one has to worry about what's in your mind. With everyone's imagination atrophied, no one will ever be a threat to the world" (Palahniuk 18-9). At a later instance in the novel, Streator remarks that "Big Brother fills us all with the same crap... he was clever the same way everybody thinks

they're clever" (Palahniuk 150). In addition to revealing Streator's perception of the media, these instances indicate that he views it as a method utilized by the government in order to eliminate individuality, prevent independent thinking, and dominate the lives of all citizens in order to establish dominance and exercise absolute power to satisfy the ulterior motive of forced compliance, involuntary conformity, and the abolition of free will.

Ironically, Streator essentially becomes both Big Brother and a type of submissive slave that he frequently condemns, when he realizes that he occupies the power of life and death with the culling song. Despite Streator's attempts to avoid the media's overwhelming influence and dissuasion of independent thought, he, nonetheless, becomes controlled by the culling song, in much of the same way that he attempts to avoid by evading all types of media. Just as the media, according to Streator, have taken measures to ensure that "anymore, no one's mind is their own... You can't concentrate. You can't think" (Palahniuk 19), Streator robs individuals of their own free will and strips them of their right to personal opinions and independent thoughts by instantly killing them every time they evoke even the slightest annoyance. Even more, Streator, just like his perception of Big Brother's desire for conformity, expects everyone to think like him and share his preferences, opinions, and irritable demeanor, particularly in his partiality to quiet environments. Similar to his assertion that Big Brother continuously keeps individuals "always distracted" and "fully absorbed" (Palahniuk 18), Streator, too, must continuously distract others, so that they will not discover that he harbors the power of the culling song and associate him with the murders. In his attempts to justify the murders with halfhearted excuses, including "he called me an asshole" (Palahniuk 136), "he pushed me" (Palahniuk 136) and "his stereo was too damn loud" (Palahniuk 136), Streator simply perpetuates the notion that he and Big Brother are one and the same, at least in ideological theory.

Contradictorily, Streator dominates the lives of others, like Big Brother, as he becomes dominated by the culling song as a result of his now corrupted nature. Francisco Collado-Rodríguez asserts that *Lullaby* highlights the many potentials of language by illustrating that "the persuasive power of language to kill eventually gives way to the power of language to enslave people" (631), referring to how the possession of the culling song and the knowledge of its effects eventually corrupt Streator and condemns him to a life of malice and misery. All throughout the novel, Streator criticizes and condemns his neighbors, whom he perceives as "sound-oholics" (Palahniuk 15) and "calm-ophobics" (Palahniuk 18) because of their constant exposure to the media, via television, radio, newspapers and magazines and their inability to maintain a quiet environment.

As Streator initially learns about the culling song, he seems horrified and avows to never use it again. As the novel progresses, and Streator uses the song with increasing frequency, he desensitizes himself to the idea of committing murder and cannot control his urges to utilize the song, just as he feared were Big Brother's intentions within the intellect of masses - using the culling song, he kills people secretly, just as he fears Big Brother is doing to the intelligence of society. In later instances, Streator fails to take responsibility for his actions by portraying the culling song much more like a reflex instead of a deliberate action, such as "hitting me fast as a chill" (Palahniuk 90), "the culling song echoes through my head" (Palahniuk 103), and "for whatever reason, the culling song comes to mind" (Palahniuk 114). While he sees his neighbors as dominated and enslaved by the media and government-Big Brother, he is indeed enslaved and controlled by the culling song, as it overtakes his abilities to make decisions, control his impulses, and even, in some instances, decide who to kill.

In direct contrast to Streator's reminders throughout the novel about the constant infiltration of media exposure and advertisement influence, one aspect of the culling song that makes it particularly dangerous is the fact that its capabilities are not advertised or otherwise indicated in the actual song or in the book from which it is excerpted. Streator receives no forewarning of its deadly consequences until they become a reality. With this circumstance as an example, Chase describes one of the possibilities of unsuccessful communicative exchange by stating that "without ability to translate words into verifiable meanings, most people are the inevitable victims of both commercial and literary fraud [and] their mental life is increasingly corrupted" (27). Equally, without the

knowledge of the poem's capacities for murder, Streator inadvertently kills his wife and infant daughter, rendering not only them, but also himself in many ways, victims of language abuse, in terms of misinterpreting its purpose and intentions as both speakers and recipients. Streator's oblivion conveys the importance of speakers' knowledge regarding linguistic meaning and the significance of thoroughly understanding the purposes and intentions related to all language utilized for successful communication.

Despite the conceit that fiction does not depict real(istic) actions within actual contexts, Barrie Ruth Straus proclaims that "fictional language is not without real effect" (220) and, throughout which, can indeed provoke the reader to "find himself contemplating the real world, or experiencing real emotions and real insights" (220). In keeping with how the elements of fantasy and magic in *Lullaby* function inversely to help readers understand the novel's implications for and revelations of reality, Collado-Rodríguez remarks that "in both a metaphoric and a literal sense, the fantastic in *Lullaby* has become a powerful device in Palahniuk's fiction to develop further his bleak evaluation of the human condition" (635). While the end result of murder stemming directly from one's misuse and misinterpretation of language remains entirely unfeasible, language does indeed contain the power to ignite passionate emotions and fervent dispositions that can then provoke such extreme results, as in Tsesis's descriptions of religious textual misinterpretations, the functions of hate crimes, oppressive language. Therefore, it may be inferred that the power of language, in and of itself, to serve as a murder weapon, serves two purposes within the novel: to challenge "our rationalized understanding of reality" (Collado-Rodríguez 621) and reveal language as the basis of one's thoughts, tendencies, and actions.

The impossibility of language to actually murder someone, much less through the verbalization of written communication, may provoke some readers to jump to the assumptive conclusion that words, then, are irrelevant and trivial in the grand scheme of communication. While these readers are partially correct in their assumption that words themselves bear insubstantial significance in terms of facilitating communication, they are equally incorrect by assuming that words play no critical role in constructing language for communicative use. What these readers fail to keep in mind is that words represent the most fundamental aspect of language; it is with words that language is constructed into sentences, which Edmund Burke Huey defines as "a unitary expression of a thought" (152), and Wilhelm Wundt further describes as "a linking of a succession of words or concepts" (20). Although these definitions can be argued in the cases of one-word sentences, such as "Help!" and "Fire!", both of these expressions contain the necessary information needed to convey a complete thought, this information is implied rather than articulated, as with multiword sentences.

With sentences, speakers may then proceed to fulfilling communicative purposes. Streator demonstrates an instance of utilizing sentences to construct meaning and convey communication, when he recites the culling song for the first time after realizing its deadly potential. He remarks that "the first word generates the second [and] the first line generates the next" (Palahniuk 60), depicting how language is structured for communication, in words, which are used to make sentences, which are then used in transmitting information. Although the result of this instance of communication (and all others which involve the culling song) yields the negative outcome of murder, Streator nonetheless demonstrates how language is assembled to fulfill the purpose of communication, in addition to demonstrating the importance, once again, of purposes and intentions of the particular language being utilized.

Although Huey denotes sentences, instead of words, as "the unit of language everywhere" (152), he does so because the sentence is the first unit of language that actually functions in order to convey meaning and serve communicative purposes because of its ability to express a unified thought. Similarly, Wundt explains that a sentence "stands as a whole at the cognitive level while it is being spoken" (21). Controversially, sentences do not represent "an image running... through consciousness where each single word or single sound appears only momentarily while the

preceding and following elements are lost from consciousness" (Wundt 21), as these thoughts contain no unity and therefore, cannot function as conveyers of meaning for effective communication.

To illustrate, for instance, if someone utters the word *book*, with no other words preceding or following it, the purposes and linguistic intentions will remain unknown, as it is unclear what the speaker means (Does he mean *book* as a noun, *book* in the verb form, as in moving or traveling at a rapid pace, or *book* as an adjective, such as in the *book* cart or the *bookshelf*?) and what he intended by uttering this single word (Does he want a book from the bookstore? Does he want to read a book? Does he see a book out of place?). While this single word does not reveal any information for effective communicative purposes in this particular instance, when the word is combined with other words, as in the sentence *I want to read a book to you*, or in *I need my book for class*, the purpose of the words and the linguistic intentions become clear and comprehensible, thus allowing for communicative interaction and linguistic exchange to occur.

Just as a house cannot be built with a single brick, effective communication cannot occur using words alone. While a single brick used to build a house is nothing more than, well, a brick, a single word represents nothing more than a unit of language when attempting to communicate. Herbert E. Brekle emphasizes this concept by explaining that "the use of words - put together into appropriate texts... is regarded as a powerful means of exerting influence" (83). Also, as the amount of bricks needed to build a house depends on the house's intended size, the amount of words needed to construct meaningful language and produce effective communication depends on the speaker's purpose for utilizing the particular words, as well as the speaker's intentions resulting from the linguistic interaction. Both of these aspects represent critical components of language in communication, and Streator's use of the culling song demonstrates the consequential results that occur when both aspects fail to work harmoniously. In addressing the culling song's intention, some readers may raise the question that if the song itself harbors the capacity for murder, then what exactly is it about these particular words in this exact arrangement that renders it capable of killing people? The culling song, after all, is just "an old song about animals going to sleep" (Palahniuk 255). Despite Streator's reading aloud of printed language, as opposed to actually constructing the language himself, the language proves just as compelling and effectual as that which one constructs on their own with the intention of communicating.

Like the bricks that when grouped together correctly and effectively, form an entire house, words must also be grouped together to form structures, phrases and/or sentences. It is with phrases and sentences that speakers' meanings are conveyed and their intentions are understood, so that successful communication becomes possible. Tzvetan Todorov clarifies this notion by emphasizing that languages, whether "spoken or written - are not fundamentally different from other human acts: they are all on the same level" (118). The significance of Carl Streator's actions lies not within the plausibility of using language (which in this case, manifests in the form of a nursery rhyme lullaby) as a means of murder, but within the revelation and realization that language is indeed capable of provoking destructive ideas, narcissistic philosophies, and prejudicial, intimidating dispositions among individuals who are undeniably capable of producing results such as suppression, oppression, fear, and ultimately, murder.

Speaking of the destructive capabilities of language, Chase affirms that "there is little fault to be found with the words we use, [yet] much with the way we use them" (353). Like the culling song, individual words in and of themselves convey no immediate danger. As Karl Sornig reiterates, "it is never the words themselves that should be dubbed evil and poisonous... the responsibility for any damage that might have been done by using certain means of expression still lies with the users" (96). After all, individuals must combine words with other aspects of language, such as syntax and grammatical conventions, in order for language to develop any type of comprehensible meaning necessary for communication. In these combinations, on the other hand, lies the potency and power of language, because it is in these combinations that reveal the purposes, intentions, and

interpretations. Following the acknowledgment that words in particular combinations and contexts embody these capabilities and execute these powers, the question that then arises is: how are they able to do so?

The power of language is most commonly explained with the speech-act theory, which justifies how words function as not only units of communication, but as executors of actions as well. One of the speech-act theory's earliest pioneers, J. L. Austin, recognized that not all word combinations and sentences serve the sole purpose of simply making statements, but can also function to ask questions and express exclamations, commands, wishes, declarations, or concessions. Acknowledging these distinctions becomes a critical aspect in understanding the three types of acts, locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary, which comprise the speech-act theory and explain how words function to execute different types of actions.

While words must generally appear in the form of a sentence in order to convey meaning, Austin considers most sentences *performative*, meaning that "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action - it is not normally thought of as just saying something" (6-7). Moreover, Austin proclaims that "there is no great distinction between statements and performative utterances" (52), since sentences rarely serve the sole purposes of literal matters-of-fact. Karl Sornig echoes Austin in his observation that "there is no such thing as a 'pure', unbiased statement: the process of verbalizing thought and transmitting ideas involves the simultaneous signaling of purposes, aims[,] and wishes[,] along with the message itself" (95). This lack of distinction indicates that all language is powerful, to some degree, in executing functions not limited to that of just exchanges of communication. One of these functions specifically regards matters of power, not just in terms of the capabilities of language to fulfill various purposes, but also in how language enables other individuals, such as in Brekle's assertion that "all... types of speech acts are in principle suitable for enforcing the interests of power" (82). The particular power being enforced and the way of enforcing the power depends largely on the type of speech act utilized under different circumstances.

The three types of speech acts are distinguished not only by the speaker's intentions for them, but by the results that they evoke. As such, they reveal the degree to which language proves a potent instigator of ideas and actions. Locutionary acts, the least complex of the three, represent statements of thoughts or observations, illocutionary acts fulfill an intention and include warnings, threats, requests, commands, and descriptions, and perlocutionary acts, represent "the achieving of certain effects by saying something" (Austin 120). Streater's initial reading of the culling song for entertainment purposes indicate his assumption that, with the song, he was performing an illocutionary act. Reading the culling song, unbeknownst to speakers, however, instigates the perlocutionary act of murder.

Granting that Streater initially bears no deliberate responsibility for the murders that occur directly because of his reading, the culling song and its uses exemplify the importance of distinguishing between the different linguistic functions, particularly between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, and utilizing language to best execute these functions. George M. Wilson declares that "the illocutionary force of an utterance centrally depends on the utterer's speech-act intention" (181). True, a speaker's intentions greatly determine what language they use in different communicative exchanges, but problems arise when a speaker's intentions are not perceived by recipients as such, or when the language executes a different speech-act than what the speaker originally intends, as in Streater's case. The discrepancy between these concepts demonstrates why discrepancies between speakers and recipients of language during communication lead to failed communication, as the language did not actually do what it intended to do or was not interpreted as such.

Although some critics may argue that a single component of the communication process, speaker or recipient, maintains precedence over the other, a noteworthy aspect of the speech act theory is that it emphasizes both types of participants (speakers and recipients) in the communication process

as equally critical components, by substantiating that the particular speech act that is performed, and the success of it, for that matter, depends just as much on speakers' intentions as on those of recipients' responses. Throughout *Lullaby*, Palahniuk manipulates the communication process and obscures the roles of speaker and recipient with the various circumstances surrounding the culling song.

Despite the additional challenge of magic incorporation and the impossible likelihood of the novel's events transpiring in actuality, they do reflect genuine aspects of language and its functions, as well as indicate authentic applications for the use of language and speech acts in the authentic process of communication. For one, the culling song does not require Streator to actually verbalize it in order to execute its capacity to kill; in many instances, Streator reports simply thinking the song or having the song "spin through [his] head" (Palahniuk 90). Another character in the novel, Mona Sabbat, explains to Streator that the predominant factor in the culling song is "the practitioner's intention" (Palahniuk 77) and that any spell, be it the culling song or any else, will work "if the practitioner's intentions are strong enough" (Palahniuk 77). In this instance, Palahniuk highlights the impact that language bears upon one's psyche, logic, and rationale, much like Tesis discusses with hate speech, slurs, and verbal slander, as one's thoughts often transpire into words and consequentially, into actions that can pose immediate threats to the safety and well-being of others.

Granting that the speech-act theory focuses primarily on the speaker and recipient during communication, Palahniuk further challenges the functions of language by using the culling song to suggest that language, in and of itself, contains power that extends beyond the control of both the speaker *and* recipient, like "words... mixing in a soup that could trigger a chain reaction" (Palahniuk 245) when formulated into "just the right combination" (Palahniuk 245). Streator does not intend to kill his family upon the initial reading, nor does his family wish to die as a result of hearing it. Death does indeed occur, in spite of Streator's innocent intentions and his family's guiltless reception resulting in unknowing interpretation.

Even so, similar instances occur with real language use, such as when a speaker makes a statement with no intention of causing discomfort, yet the irritated recipient cannot pinpoint exactly why the language upset him or her. Because this particular recipient cannot explain what exactly irritated him or her, communication lines between the two parties become increasingly irreparable, eventually damaging (and in some cases, completely destroying) the relationship between the two individuals, as proven to represent an underlying factor in many cases of divorce, lawsuits, and disintegration of business partnerships. An innocent articulation, when combined with an indistinct interpretation, catalyzes serious consequences that usually do not mimic, but certainly represent, Streator's initial encounter with the culling song.

Palahniuk's manipulation of traditional communication interactions is that a recipient does not actually have to hear the culling song in order for it to enact its murderous effects. This reason resides among the many that contribute to the culling song's extreme capacity for danger: since recipients are unaware that they are indeed inadvertent and involuntary within this communicative exchange, they remain unable to defend themselves. Here, Palahniuk problematizes the notion that ignorance is bliss by illuminating the fact that not knowing what others think can indeed directly impact one's safety and welfare. Although many individuals are taught from very young ages to not dwell over the opinions of others, this mindset may not prove the most advantageous, especially in terms of defending oneself from developing stereotypical perceptions, succumbing to bandwagon fallacies, and from becoming targets of extremists with opposing views and malicious intentions.

Despite the element of magic and fantasy that contributes to the culling song's dangers, speaking a more practical context, Brekle claims that "only if the victim sees through the mechanisms of the... speech, is he in a position to resist its effects" (82). This notion, when examined alongside the culling song's unknowing victims, reiterates the importance of not only the language that one employs, but also the significance of being able to accurately interpret speakers' intentions for the language of which one becomes a recipient. In other words, remaining ignorant to foreboding language and its

subsequential results, all but pardons one from falling victim to its effects. In many cases, as with the culling song's unsuspecting recipients, this oblivion only exacerbates the victimization process.

Streator's eventual use of the culling song as a perlocutionary act to eliminate anyone who crosses his path not only reveals his corrupted nature, but also illustrates the importance of understanding exactly what language means, how to utilize it to engage in effective communication, and what potential consequences for negative reception exists in the particular use. According to Straus, Austin "stipulated his theory of language did not apply to literature, which he excluded as nonserious and parasitic use of language" (213). Interestingly, in a direct contrast, Todorov acknowledges literature as "a conscious use of language, as opposed to that unconscious, careless use of it in practical discourse, where it is merely a function of the need to communicate" (123). Although no real texts will produce effects as extreme as causing instant death to all recipients when read aloud, some texts, such as those outlining religious doctrines, political propaganda intended to rouse fear, and texts that feature difficult subject matter, like suicide, rape, drug abuse or addiction, and terminal illness, tend to be already subjective by the nature of the content. These types of literature highlight the importance of reader discretion and reasonable discernment regarding the purposes and intentions of the text in order to avoid misreading, misinterpreting, and misunderstanding.

Conclusion

Literature, just like all other types of language used for communicative purposes, bears the power to persuade, provoke ideas, and corrupt readers, as Streator demonstrates with the culling song. Wilson echoes this notion by explaining that "a fundamental but minimal part of what is involved in understanding a literary text is the reader's understanding of the sentences it contains as expressions of definite linguistic meanings and as bearers of particular illocutionary forces" (181). Readers represent both recipients and speakers of the language that authors utilize and must understand not only what is meant by the language, in terms of denotative and connotative significance, but also the implications that the language conveys - and the speech-acts that the language can indeed provoke.

The various facets that comprise the speech-act theory are, of course, not intended as substitutes for common sense, nor are they to be regarded as transcending the boundaries of reality and plausibility in order to prove applicable in actual contexts. Austin verifies this criterion by avowing that "it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should *also* perform certain *other* actions, whether 'physical' or 'mental' actions" (120).

Like the culling song, which proves no threat to safety until it is initially read, the influential dangers of literature lie not within the texts themselves, but within the potential for abuse by readers following their exposure to it. The culling song, though unrealistic in nature, initially emphasizes and continuously reiterates the importance of linguistic purpose and communicative intention, whether communicating in spoken, written, signed, or nonverbal language. It is not in the culling song's words, phrases, content, or themes, but in the linguistic purpose and underlying intention where the dangers and potentials for abuse and misinterpretations lurk.

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