

Kimberlee Tinio

Gideon Burton

English 295

14 April 2014

The Power of Language and Names in *Anthem* and *Through the Looking-Glass*

Consider the power of language. Indeed, the whole of history is controlled by language, because language is the medium through which we record it. Because the Bible is so widely read, William Tyndale's English translation has greatly influenced much of our modern day language and thought—when we quote the words of Christ, we are actually quoting Tyndale's English interpretation of Christ's words. It is evident that words have a great potential to influence the language, and therefore thoughts of others, since language is the medium through which thoughts are expressed. Ayn Rand's *Anthem* (published in 1938) and Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (published in 1871) both explore the effects of language on someone's thoughts, actions, and perception of reality, as well as the effect of a name on one's identity. Both of these novels explore the idea that language is power. *Anthem* is a dystopia, with obvious social commentary about language, whereas *Through the Looking Glass* has a much more whimsical tone and uses language less oppressively, but despite their different genres and tones, each novel demonstrates how language can literally exert subconscious control over people's thoughts and perceptions of reality, and particularly, the power of a name.

Language has been regarded throughout history as something with the power to control reality. According to the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language (CEL)*, "All forms of supernatural belief involve the use of language as a means of controlling the forces which the

believers feel affect their lives” (13). Examples that the author cites include prayers, rituals used to charm objects, banish spirits, and other instances in which language is used to try to control matter or communicate with an otherworldly being. As humans, we already inherently believe that language contains a certain level of power and control over external forces. But language may also exert a certain amount of control over our thoughts.

The relationship between language and thought has been widely debated throughout the centuries. Some argued that language and thought are entirely separate entities, and one is dependent on the other. Others argued that the two were one and the same. Near the end of the eighteenth century, around the time period that Carroll was writing *Through the Looking Glass*, the linguistic ideas that would later develop into a theory called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis came into debate, which discussed the dependence of thought on language and the inability of concepts found in one language to be directly translatable into another (CEL 14). Possibly in response to the linguistic debates of his contemporaries, Carroll developed a keen interest in linguistics, for which he would become infamous. Ayn Rand, on the other hand, wrote during the first half of the twentieth century, and is not as renowned for her language usage. However, it is evident that the language in *Anthem* is an integral part of the story. Both stories require a particular attention to the language used to construct them in order to fully appreciate them as works of literature.

By limiting the language, it is possible to exert control over people’s thoughts. In *Anthem*, for example, the idea of the individual has been eradicated from the language, which is the government’s way of controlling the people into thinking that they are united as one Great We. In part one, Equality 7-2521 states the following: “We are alone here under the earth. It is a fearful

word, alone. The laws say that none among men may be alone, ever and at any time, for this is the great transgression and the root of all evil” (Part 1). In these three sentences alone, we can see the extent to which the language controls Equality 7-2521’s thoughts. He uses a plural personal pronoun to describe himself—“we” instead of “I”—which reveals that he cannot conceptualize the idea of the individual because the individual does not exist within the language. He describes the word “alone” as “fearful,” because the law forbids aloneness; it is clear that he has been told that solitude is evil many times throughout his life, and that he believes it. He states that being alone is “the great transgression and the root of all evil,” as a fact, without expressing any doubt as to whether this statement may be false, but this is a reflection of the mantra that has been repeated to him over and over throughout his life, rather than a reflection of his true opinion.

A similar situation arises when Alice encounters the flowers in the flower bed; they try to define her as a flower, while Alice insists that she is a little girl (Chapter 2). These flowers are limited by their knowledge of what living things are—it seems as though all they can imagine is that living things must be flowers, so when they try to describe another girl to Alice, they describe her as having “the same awkward shape as [Alice]...but she’s redder, and her petals are shorter.” They are limited by their language—skirts are described and perceived as petals. The flowers are incapable of comprehending human beings as a different species. This is similar to the inability of the characters in *Anthem* to comprehend the idea of aloneness, because disunity likewise does not exist within their language. Both examples show how the limitations of language can limit the scope of comprehension of concepts outside of the language.

Language can control not only thought, but actions as well. In *Through the Looking Glass*, the subconscious control that language exerts is manifest more in the characters' actions than in their thoughts. In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*, the theme of *Through the Looking Glass* is described as “revolv[ing] around potential annihilation: the fragile insubstantiality and unreliability of language demonstrates the individual's pawned enslavement to narrative discourse.” The characters in Carroll's story obey a strict, whimsical literality within the language; they are pawns in the story, slaves to the rules of their literal language.

One example of language controlling the characters within *Through the Looking Glass* is when Alice experiences a linguistic impasse with the White Queen when they discuss the conditions that Alice would experience under her hire: "Two pence a week, and jam every other day" (Chapter 5). Alice tells the Queen that she doesn't want any jam, and the Queen tells her that she couldn't have any jam that day anyway, because the rule is "jam every other day: to-day isn't any other day, you know." The language controls them: it will never be possible to eat jam, because it will always be “to-day,” and therefore never a jam day. Carroll manipulates logic using the language, and the characters are strictly controlled by this linguistic logic, which demonstrates the power of words.

Another way that language controls the characters in *Through the Looking Glass* is through nursery rhymes. The characters adhere to the behavior expected of them through the language of the fairy tales. For example, Alice recites the following nursery rhyme aloud to Tweedledee and Tweedledum: “Tweedledum and Tweedledee / Agreed to have a battle; / For Tweedledum said Tweedledee / Had spoiled his nice new rattle” (Chapter 4). Then later on, Tweedledum shows his broken rattle to Alice, and conflict erupts; Tweedledum says to his

brother “Of course you’ll agree to have a battle?” to which the other replies “I suppose so” (Chapter 4). The rest of the nursery rhyme reads “Just then flew down a monstrous crow, / As black as a tar-barrel; / Which frightened both the heroes so / They both forgot their quarrel” (Chapter 4). Later, when the two are fighting, they are distracted by an enormous black crow, which send them both scurrying for cover, and the battle ends abruptly. They follow the behavioral pattern outlined for them in the nursery rhyme; they are controlled by the language. Initially after Alice recites this rhyme, the two brothers deny the verity of its content; Tweedledum says, “I know what you’re thinking about...but it isn’t so, nohow,” and Tweedledee continues, “Contrariwise...if it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be; but as it isn’t, it ain’t. That’s logic” (Chapter 4). Yet later, when the circumstances emerge, they abide by the rhyme to the letter. It is as if the characters have no choice but to abide subconsciously by the rhyme that Alice had recited to them. The nursery rhyme proves to be prophetic, and interestingly, Alice herself is aware that the characters are controlled by their nursery rhymes. This is demonstrated when she watches them fight, and thinks to herself, “I wish the monstrous crow would come!” and shortly thereafter, a giant crow appears and interrupts the battle.

Another example is that of Humpty Dumpty. She finds him precariously perched atop a high wall, and recites his nursery rhyme aloud: “Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall: / Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. / All the King’s horses and all the King’s men / Couldn’t put Humpty Dumpty in his place again” (Chapter 6). Alice becomes concerned for the safety of Humpty Dumpty on the wall, and when she expresses this concern, suggesting that he come down from the wall, Humpty Dumpty begins to huffily tell Alice that the King promised to send all of his horses and men to assist him if he fell—“which there [was] no chance of, but *if* [he] did”—but

Alice finishes his sentence before he can interrupt her. Humpty Dumpty is confused and suspicious at Alice's knowledge of the King's promise; he does not consciously realize that he is being controlled by this language, although Alice is aware of this control because she is the master of the language. This is the power of language over characters in *Through the Looking Glass*; they are controlled by the language without even realizing it.

But beyond controlling thoughts and actions, language is also closely tied to identity. In an essay entitled "Alice in Analysis," A. Bokay discusses the idea that Carroll employs a "subjective language" within his novels, meaning the language can be interpreted differently by each person, which causes anxiety among its speakers. He says, "The users of such language often feel the anxiety that their language cannot be interpreted and will thus lose its existence, and that their identity will be questioned" (Bokay 87). This is especially evident in Alice's interactions with Humpty Dumpty.

When Alice first encounters Humpty Dumpty, he asks for her name. When she tells him her name is Alice, he tells her, "It's a stupid name enough! ...What does it mean?" (Chapter 6). Humpty Dumpty argues that specific meaning behind a name is essential for defining one's identity, explaining that his own name "means the shape [he is]," but with a name like Alice, she "might be any shape, almost." This insistence that names define personal identity demonstrates how crucial names are as part of language. Names are a crucial part of social interaction—every word in a language is a name for a concept, and names are simply specific words for specific people. While Prometheus and Gaea create their inward identities through their names, Alice and Humpty Dumpty struggle with the idea that a name should define what you are on the outside,

and whether or not a name should have meaning, and both feel the strain of anxiety that comes from the disagreement of the interpretation of their subjective language.

One of the significant or unique things about language, especially in terms of identity, is the idea of names. Names have a particular power in language, and it is significant that names are changed or confused in both novels so often. In *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice experiences an identity crisis when she enters into the wood where names are forgotten. She forgets her name, insisting that it must begin with “L,” until she finds a fawn who cannot remember its own name, either. They walk around with Alice’s arm gently around its neck, until they reached a field. When they exit the wood, the Fawn “[gives] a sudden bound into the air, and [shakes] itself free from Alice’s arm. ‘I’m a Fawn!’ it crie[s] out in a voice of delight. ‘And dear me! you’re a human child!’ A sudden look of alarm [comes] into its beautiful brown eyes, and it dart[s] away at full speed” (Chapter 3). The two coexist peacefully, speaking softly and walking calmly through the wood, before they remember who they are. But when the Fawn recognizes her as a human child—when he can put a name to her species—he bounds away in fright. The Fawn is afraid of humans, but only when he remembers their name. This demonstrates how important a name can be.

Names are equally significant in *Anthem*. In Adrian Room’s study *Naming Names*, he discusses the common motivation of changing a name as a pathway to a new identity. He says, “Short of an actual physical reincarnation, a change of name is one of the most popular and efficacious ways, many believe, of becoming a new or different person” (Room 7). In *Anthem*, the purpose appears to be similar—to create a new identity. The protagonist and his love interest undergo three different names throughout the course of the novel. Their given names, Equality

7-2521 and Liberty 5-3000, strip them of individuality. “Equality” is a title that embodies the idea of the Great We; its connotation is one of unity and conformism. “Liberty” is more ironic; it suggests a freedom, when in reality, the people under their government are strictly controlled.

The characters gain more power and more freedom as they rename each other and themselves. After subtly greeting and speaking to each other over a long period of time, Equality 7-2521 admits to giving Liberty 5-3000 a new name: “The Golden One” (Part 4). Then she tells him, “look[ing] straight into our eyes and [holding] their head high and [answers]: ‘The Unconquered.’” These new names have more individuality; “The Golden One” can refer to the character’s blonde hair, but can also be a reference to the value and rarity of gold, an interpretation which would be consistent with Rand’s passionate views on economic theory (Buechner). “The Unconquered” is a powerful name; it connotes power to withstand oppression and power to rise above abject circumstances. After this mutual renaming, the two characters feel emboldened enough to break the law against blatant interaction with one another, and the Golden One offers the Unconquered water to drink from her hands. Prior to this experience, they had only interacted with small, nearly undetectable gestures, but afterward, they feel empowered enough by their new names to break the law.

The final, official renaming is the most significant. After fleeing into the wilderness, the Unconquered and the Golden One wander until they find a house in the mountain, leftover from the times before the war and untouched by fire, where the Unconquered discovers the personal pronoun, “I,” as well as the new names that they would keep. The Unconquered renames himself Prometheus, the name of a man who “took the light of the gods and he brought it to men, and he taught men to be gods. And he suffered for his deed as all bearers of light must suffer,” and

names his companion Gaea, “who was the mother of the earth and of all the gods” (Part 12).

These names are specific and personal to each character, and elevate them to a status above the gods. Prometheus and Gaea are allusions to Greek mythology, which creates the parallel of returning to the days of Man and the Renaissance, which were the days of discovery and philosophy among mankind. These words—these names—have the power to invoke this parallel simply through the connotations of their words. These names create their new identities.

Language and names bear enormous importance, both in real life and in literature. Since language is so intertwined with thought, the two influence each other, sometimes to the point of controlling one’s thoughts or actions due to the limitations of the language. This idea can be found throughout literature; particularly, Ayn Rand’s *Anthem* and Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* explore this concept of language controlling the characters. Names, which are an essential part of language, hold particular weight in terms of power. Names can create identity, and changing a name changes one’s identity, which can empower those who adopt these new names. Language and names are an integral part of human interaction; we must remember that it is always important, because “Wherever human beings exist they have a language” (Ong 7). And consequently, if we can recognize the power of words, we can change the lives of others.

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