

ANALYZING FEMALE GOTHIC FICTION THROUGH KRISTEVA'S THEORY OF ABJECTION

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Abstract

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection offers a profound framework for analyzing Gothic fiction, especially Female Gothic. This paper examines how the concept of abjection, defined as the state of being cast off, permeates narratives like Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*. The study explores how abjection manifests through themes of terror, disorder, and the grotesque, disrupting cultural norms and revealing deep-seated psychic and cultural conflicts. By delving into the representation of female bodies and identities in these texts, this paper aims to highlight the enduring significance of abjection in Gothic literature.

Keywords: Abjection, Female Gothic, Julia Kristeva, Gothic fiction, gender identity, terror, disorder, grotesque.

Introduction

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, rooted in the idea of being cast off, has been a cornerstone in feminist critiques of literature. Abjection encompasses all aspects of the body and its functions that are deemed unclean and improper for public discourse. This concept is particularly potent in Gothic fiction, where themes of terror, monstrosity, and the grotesque challenge cultural norms. In Female Gothic fiction, abjection provides a framework for analyzing gender identities and the conflicts they engender. This paper explores the application of Kristeva's abjection theory in four seminal Gothic texts: *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier, *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson, *Interview with the Vampire* by Anne Rice, and *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter.

Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier

In *Rebecca*, the protagonist's struggle with the lingering presence of the titular character epitomizes abjection. Abjection, as theorized by Julia Kristeva, refers to the state of being cast off, encompassing aspects of the body and its functions deemed unclean and improper for public discourse. This notion becomes a central theme in *Rebecca*, as the spectral presence of Rebecca de Winter disrupts the symbolic order of Manderley, challenging patriarchal norms and traditional femininity. Rebecca's character, even in death, embodies a femme fatale whose defiance of societal expectations poses a significant threat to the established order represented by Maxim de Winter.

Rebecca's open sexuality and non-conformity to the docile, submissive role expected of women in her social milieu make her an abject figure. Her presence at Manderley, both during her life and posthumously, exerts a powerful influence over the household, haunting the new Mrs. de Winter and unsettling the patriarchal stability Maxim strives to maintain. The narrative reveals how Rebecca's abject nature continues to pervade every aspect of life at Manderley, illustrating the persistent and invasive qualities of the abject.

Maxim de Winter's decision to murder Rebecca stems from his inability to control or conform her to his ideals of femininity. Rebecca's defiance and independence threaten Maxim's authority and his perception of masculinity. Her blatant disregard for the traditional female role undermines Maxim's control, leading him to perceive her as a corrupting force that must be eradicated to restore order. However, the act of murder fails to eliminate Rebecca's presence; instead, it solidifies her abjection. Rebecca's ghostly influence remains potent, her memory lingering in the minds of those at Manderley and continuing to challenge the symbolic order.

The new Mrs. de Winter, the narrator, becomes a vessel through which Rebecca's abjection is explored. Her insecurity and feelings of inadequacy are exacerbated by the omnipresent reminders of Rebecca's superiority and allure. The narrator's struggle to assert her identity in the shadow of Rebecca's enduring presence highlights the psychological impact of abjection. Rebecca's former maid, Mrs. Danvers, perpetuates this abjection by idolizing Rebecca and

undermining the narrator's attempts to establish herself as the new mistress of Manderley. Mrs. Danvers' devotion to Rebecca and her malicious manipulation of the narrator further entrench Rebecca's haunting presence within the household.

Kristeva's theory posits that the abject must be cast out to maintain the subject's identity and social order. However, in *Rebecca*, the abject is never fully expelled. Rebecca's influence seeps into the very fabric of Manderley, manifesting in the physical environment and the psychological states of its inhabitants. The pervasive sense of Rebecca's presence disrupts the daily life at Manderley, with her belongings, her preferred arrangements, and even her scent serving as constant reminders of her dominance. This enduring presence suggests that the abject cannot be entirely eradicated but remains on the periphery, continually threatening to resurface and destabilize the symbolic order.

The narrative structure of *Rebecca* reinforces the theme of abjection by juxtaposing the memories of Rebecca with the experiences of the new Mrs. de Winter. The unnamed narrator's journey through Manderley is marked by encounters with Rebecca's past, each instance underscoring the tension between the living and the dead, the present and the past. This temporal disjunction adds to the sense of unease and highlights the inescapability of Rebecca's abjection.

Rebecca's role as an abject figure also serves to critique the constraints of patriarchal society. Her rejection of traditional gender roles and her assertion of sexual autonomy challenge the rigid expectations placed on women. In death, Rebecca's abjection continues to expose the fragility of the patriarchal structures that sought to contain her. Maxim's failure to fully control or suppress Rebecca's influence reveals the inherent instability of these structures and the power of the abject to disrupt and challenge societal norms.

Rebecca utilizes the concept of abjection to explore themes of identity, power, and societal expectations. Rebecca's enduring presence at Manderley illustrates the persistent and invasive nature of the abject, challenging the symbolic order and revealing the deep-seated conflicts within the characters. Through the lens of Kristeva's theory, the novel offers a profound critique of patriarchal norms and the complex interplay between the self and the abject, ultimately highlighting the transformative power of confronting the abject in Gothic literature.

***The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson**

Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* centers on Eleanor Vance, whose strained relationship with her deceased mother becomes a source of profound abjection. Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection is particularly illuminating when applied to Eleanor's experience, as the novel explores themes of terror, disorder, and the grotesque through the lens of Eleanor's psychological state. Hill House itself acts as a physical manifestation of Eleanor's inner turmoil, embodying the abject and reflecting her fragmented identity.

Eleanor's relationship with her mother was fraught with guilt, resentment, and a deep sense of duty. Having spent years as her mother's caregiver, Eleanor's identity became inextricably linked to her mother's demands and the oppressive environment of their home. This relationship left Eleanor emotionally stunted and isolated, unable to form meaningful connections or assert her own identity. Her mother's death does not free her from this psychological bondage; instead, it intensifies her feelings of abjection. The memory of her mother haunts Eleanor, much like the spectral presence of Rebecca in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. The mother's persistent influence manifests as a source of terror and disorder in Eleanor's psyche, making her vulnerable to the malevolent forces within Hill House.

Hill House, with its labyrinthine corridors, ominous architecture, and pervasive sense of malevolence, symbolizes the abject. It is a space where the boundaries between the living and the dead, the sane and the insane, are blurred. The house's very structure seems designed to disorient and unnerve its inhabitants, reflecting the chaotic and fragmented state of Eleanor's mind. This sense of disorder is amplified by the supernatural events that occur within the house. Bloodstains appear and disappear, chilling cold spots manifest, and eerie, disembodied noises reverberate through the halls. These phenomena disrupt the symbolic order and signify the collapse of rationality and coherence, plunging Eleanor deeper into abjection.

Eleanor's encounters with blood and chaos within Hill House are particularly significant. Blood, a potent symbol of the abject, represents the intrusion of the primal and the unclean into the realm of the living. When Eleanor discovers her name written in blood on the walls, it marks a profound violation of her identity. This act of abjection forces

Eleanor to confront her deepest fears and insecurities, destabilizing her sense of self. The presence of blood signifies the breakdown of the symbolic order, where the distinction between self and other, clean and unclean, is obliterated.

As Eleanor's psychological state deteriorates, her identification with Hill House grows stronger. The house becomes a projection of her inner fears and desires, a place where her repressed emotions and unresolved traumas are brought to the surface. Eleanor's increasing attachment to the house and her growing sense of belonging there highlight the inescapable nature of abjection. She begins to view Hill House as a sanctuary, a place where she can finally be herself, free from the constraints and judgments of the outside world.

Eleanor's ultimate surrender to Hill House underscores the inescapable nature of abjection. Her decision to remain in the house, despite the clear danger it poses, reflects her inability to extricate herself from the psychological grip of her past. Eleanor's final act of driving her car into a tree, mirroring her mother's death, signifies her complete immersion into the abject. This act of self-destruction can be seen as a desperate attempt to achieve a final union with the house, to dissolve the boundaries of her identity and merge with the source of her terror and fascination.

Kristeva's theory posits that abjection is a necessary process for the formation of the self, a way of establishing boundaries and maintaining the integrity of the symbolic order. However, in *The Haunting of Hill House*, Eleanor's inability to successfully navigate this process leads to her ultimate downfall. Her surrender to the house represents a collapse of these boundaries, a descent into a space where the distinctions between self and other, sanity and madness, are obliterated.

The Haunting of Hill House utilizes the concept of abjection to explore themes of identity, power, and psychological trauma. Through the lens of Kristeva's theory, Eleanor Vance's experiences at Hill House illustrate the pervasive and invasive nature of the abject. The novel highlights the conflicts surrounding gender identities and societal expectations, underscoring the transformative power of confronting the abject. By delving into the grotesque and the monstrous, Jackson's narrative provides a potent medium for examining the human condition and the fragility of the self in the face of overwhelming psychological and supernatural forces.

***Interview with the Vampire* by Anne Rice**

Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* explores abjection through the character of Claudia, a child vampire whose eternal youth and violent tendencies disrupt cultural notions of childhood innocence. Claudia's existence as a vampire embodies the ultimate abject, challenging social hierarchies and norms while highlighting the complex interplay between abjection and the self. Kristeva's theory of abjection, which encompasses all aspects of the body and its functions deemed unclean and improper, provides a compelling framework for understanding Claudia's unique position within the narrative.

Claudia's transformation into a vampire at a young age creates an immediate and profound sense of abjection. As a child, she is expected to embody innocence, purity, and potential. However, as a vampire, she becomes an eternal being of violence, hunger, and death, embodying the abject in the most literal sense. Her childlike appearance, juxtaposed with her predatory nature, disrupts the cultural expectations of childhood, making her a profoundly unsettling figure. This dissonance between her external appearance and her internal nature challenges the symbolic order and social norms, as she straddles the boundaries between life and death, innocence and corruption.

Claudia's abjection is further emphasized by her relationship with her creators, Louis and Lestat. As her "parents," they impose upon her their own desires and expectations, yet they cannot control the monstrous being they have created. Claudia's existence as a vampire forces both Louis and Lestat to confront their own abjection, as they see in her the grotesque culmination of their vampiric existence. Claudia's struggle with her identity is deeply tied to this abjection, as she grapples with her perpetual childlike body and the adult mind trapped within it. This eternal childhood becomes a prison, highlighting the grotesque nature of her existence and deepening her sense of abjection.

Claudia's violent tendencies further complicate her character and enhance her abject nature. Unlike typical portrayals of children, who are seen as harmless and dependent, Claudia is a deadly predator. Her insatiable thirst for blood and her ruthless killing methods starkly contrast with her innocent appearance, creating a disturbing and powerful image of the abject. This disruption of cultural norms surrounding childhood innocence not only challenges the reader's

perceptions but also forces the characters within the novel to confront their own fears and moral ambiguities.

The abjection experienced by Claudia is also a reflection of her struggle for autonomy and identity. Despite her physical appearance, Claudia possesses a mature intellect and desires independence, which she can never truly achieve due to her childlike body. Her frustration and rage are palpable as she recognizes her perpetual entrapment in a form that belies her true nature. This internal conflict and the external perceptions of her as a child form a central theme in her narrative, emphasizing the disjunction between self-perception and societal expectations.

Claudia's interactions with other vampires further highlight her abjection. Within the vampire community, there are strict rules against creating child vampires, as their perpetual youth and dependency are seen as abominations. Claudia's existence is thus not only a personal abjection but also a societal one, marking her as a transgressive figure even among her own kind. This societal rejection and the horror she elicits underscore the depth of her abjection and the challenges she faces in her quest for identity and acceptance.

Moreover, Claudia's abjection is intricately linked to themes of power and control. Throughout the novel, she attempts to assert her independence by manipulating and confronting both Louis and Lestat. Her ultimate plan to kill Lestat and free herself from his control illustrates her desperate struggle to break free from the bonds of her abject existence. However, her failure and subsequent death at the hands of other vampires highlight the inescapable nature of her abjection. Her death serves as a tragic culmination of her struggle, emphasizing the futility of her quest for autonomy within the confines of her abject state.

Claudia's character in *Interview with the Vampire* serves as a powerful exploration of abjection. Her eternal youth and violent tendencies disrupt cultural notions of childhood innocence, embodying the ultimate abject and challenging social hierarchies and norms. Through Claudia's struggle with her identity and the grotesque nature of her existence, Rice delves into the complex interplay between abjection and the self, highlighting the profound psychological and societal implications of abjection. By confronting and embodying the abject, Claudia's narrative provides a compelling examination of the boundaries of human experience and the inherent conflicts within the self.

***The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter**

Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* reinterprets the *Bluebeard* tale, infusing it with themes of abjection and female sexuality. Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection provides a profound framework for understanding the narrator's journey, as her confrontation with the abject shatters her innocence and forces her to grapple with her own identity and desires. The narrative begins with the young bride entering a marriage with a wealthy and mysterious man, whose opulent yet foreboding castle becomes the setting for her transformation.

The encounter with the bloody chamber itself is a pivotal moment in the story, representing the ultimate confrontation with the abject. This chamber, filled with the mutilated bodies of the Marquis's former wives, is a grotesque and horrifying space that embodies death, decay, and the collapse of the symbolic order. As the narrator lights the candles in this forbidden room, her innocence is stripped away, and she is forced to face the brutal reality of her husband's monstrous nature. The abject nature of the chamber, with its violent imagery and pervasive sense of corruption, serves as a powerful symbol of the dark undercurrents of human sexuality and power dynamics.

Carter's use of abjection in this story goes beyond the physical horrors of the bloody chamber. It delves into the psychological and emotional aspects of the narrator's transformation. The young bride's initial perception of herself is one of innocence and purity, but as she uncovers the secrets of the chamber, she becomes acutely aware of her own potential for corruption. This realization is a critical aspect of her psychological development, as she recognizes the complexities of her own desires and the dangers that lurk within her marriage.

The mother's role in the story subverts traditional gender roles and highlights the strength and resilience of female figures. Unlike the passive female characters often found in Gothic literature, the narrator's mother is portrayed as a powerful and assertive figure who ultimately rescues her daughter from the clutches of the Marquis. This maternal intervention is not just a rescue mission; it is a radical reassertion of female power and agency. The mother's bravery and decisiveness contrast sharply with the Marquis's brutality and serve to dismantle the patriarchal structures that underpin the tale.

Carter's narrative is rich with symbolic elements that explore the fears and anxieties associated with female sexuality. The bloody chamber itself can be seen as a metaphor for the fears surrounding female sexual power and the perceived threat it poses to male dominance. The Marquis's need to control and punish his wives for their perceived transgressions reflects a deep-seated fear of female autonomy and sexuality. By exposing these fears, Carter critiques the ways in which patriarchal society seeks to suppress and control women.

The narrator's journey through the story is also a journey towards self-awareness and empowerment. Her initial passive acceptance of her role as the Marquis's wife gives way to a growing sense of agency as she confronts the horrors of the bloody chamber. This transformation is facilitated by her mother's intervention, but it is also driven by her own growing understanding of her circumstances and her desire to break free from the cycle of violence and control.

Carter's reimagining of the *Bluebeard* tale is a masterful exploration of the themes of abjection, power, and female sexuality. By confronting the abject, the narrator is able to transcend her initial innocence and gain a deeper understanding of herself and the world around her. The story's conclusion, which sees the narrator and her mother reclaiming their power and agency, serves as a powerful statement about the resilience and strength of women in the face of patriarchal oppression.

The Bloody Chamber by Angela Carter uses the framework of abjection to explore complex themes of female sexuality and power. The narrator's encounter with the bloody chamber shatters her innocence and forces her to confront the abject, leading to a profound transformation in her understanding of herself and her circumstances. The mother's intervention subverts traditional gender roles and highlights the strength and resilience of female figures. Through this narrative, Carter exposes and critiques the fears surrounding female sexuality and the patriarchal structures that seek to control it, ultimately presenting a powerful vision of female empowerment and agency.

Conclusion

The study of abjection in Female Gothic fiction reveals a rich tapestry of themes that challenge cultural norms and explore the depths of human psychology. Through the lens of Kristeva's theory, characters like Rebecca, Eleanor, Claudia, and the narrator in *The Bloody Chamber* illustrate the pervasive and persistent nature of abjection. These narratives not only highlight the conflicts surrounding gender identities but also underscore the transformative power of confronting the abject. By delving into the grotesque and the monstrous, Female Gothic fiction continues to provide a potent medium for examining the human condition.

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