

Abjection: Dissonance as a Harbinger of Change

The concept of abjection has served as the starting point for disruptive conflict within a society from the earliest beginnings of literature. Defining the concept broadly as the involuntary mental separation of ourselves from an “other” that provokes reactions of recognition, disgust, and apprehension, we are able to see reflections of ourselves within it. The abject is present in modern literature in many ways, though the medium I wish to explore is that of comic books. Comic books have been around for many decades and their popularity has fluctuated accordingly. In recent years, there has been a revival of interest in comics with the internet serving as a widespread media platform and cinema retelling the old stories in a new way. Because of these changes to the industry, more people than ever before have access and exposure to the stories and the format of comics. The stories being told within them have also adjusted to this wide audience, varying greatly in subject matter and aesthetic choices as a means of communicating the intended message more effectively. For example, in the graphic novel *The Watchmen* by Alan Moore, artists and writers took the well-established dynamic of good versus evil and showed their readers that these classifications did not always exist while applying them realistically to our own world. The resulting commentary of American society in the 1980’s changed perceptions about who we idolize as heroes or damn as villains in our own lives. People and cultures throughout history have constantly pursued ways in which we can change those around us to fit our ideals. Abjection and its disruption of society as an instigation of change, is present in all literature, across cultures; thus reinforcing the idea that abjection is a deeply personal and human experience. In comic books and graphic novels, we are exposed to characters who appeal to our ability to empathize and draw us into their strictly defined world, only to use the abject to show a connection to our own world. This tactic has been used in more traditional literature for thousands of years. Comparing the characters of more contemporary literature like comics with those found in traditional literature, sheds light on how the abject in literature reflects the society in which it is written and remains a poignant means of provoking change. I wish to explore the relationship between contemporary comic characters and those in traditional literature, and how they are both able to use the abject as a means of instigating change within their respective framework.

It’s important to see how abjection manifests in societies to understand common values and ideals within a culture. Tendencies toward racism and sexism reveal themselves with involuntary reactions of disgust or horror as well as establishing certain cultural taboos like public nudity or bodily functions by measuring the same reactions. These revealed qualities can establish societal ideals by recognizing that which they wish to reject from the established society. The same qualities may pit people against one another, dividing people into factions and creating conflict that halts the way society normally functions. In *Gulliver’s Travels*, there are factions of people only separated by slight differences in beliefs and appearance. The Yahoos are a particularly explicit example of Gulliver’s abjection; they are human in every way, only having longer hair and more crude or feral practices, though Gulliver chooses to separate himself from them entirely, claiming no relation to these unwanted qualities. Sometimes ending in societal or

cultural change, oftentimes the conflict is not truly resolved; the resulting dissonance from these social clashes may manifest as prejudices or superstitions that remain to fascinate us to this day. There are culture-wide definitions of “normalcy” in every setting where there are people. Societal rules are in place to determine acceptable behavior for all members of a given society. When introduced to foreign elements, there is potential for a sense of abjection to arise in an individual. Given these social tendencies, we can see how human reactions to the abject are instinctive and involuntary but can be influenced by our own perspectives and culture.

To understand how and why characters in literature behave the way they do in the face of the abject, we must first understand how abjection is defined. The abject is a concept that concerns the general psychology of human individuals and how they react when confronted with something that horrifies but also reminds them of themselves. Julia Kristeva’s 1982 paper, “Approaching Abjection,” is a comprehensive study done on the subject; though it has fascinated psychologists for much longer than the publication date would suggest. Kristeva writes that, “...the abject refers to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other.” (Felluga) The sudden reaction forces the separation of oneself from this “other” that triggered it. The story of Medusa from Greek mythology is an excellent example of how a beautiful, innocent and pure woman became suddenly a reviled monster after an abject, sexual display. In this instance, Medusa was cast out from society, established by those still within it as an “other”. The momentary loss of distinction between the self and other can cause apprehension, horror and disgust; the process may also lead one to see their own mortality and materiality outside themselves and reflected in the established “other”. Abjection’s representation and influence in literature past and present are manifest in different genres, from ancient mythology to modern stories told on film, but each instance disrupts previously held notions about one’s world view. This forces the protagonist to resolve to a course of action that addresses the object, thus relieving the character from the clutches of abjection. For example, the character Rorschach from *The Watchmen* is depicted as being hideously ugly; a personification of abjection who works to force change in the world around him. Similarly, though on a different scale, Gulliver is faced with different manifestations of what he sees as abject; these manifestations slowly changing his perceptions of the world around him and thus his own reality.

Why is this recognition of the abject as a motivator important to understanding literature? American comic book creator Rob Schrab would argue that it’s a healthy fascination that serves as an outlet for violent or destructive urges. (Vasquez) “There’s a little monster inside all of us, a little wolf-faced monkey that needs to be satiated. As people, we mustn’t ignore that monster. If we do, we cheat ourselves.” Schrab goes on to explain the catharsis that accompanies these violent pieces in our stories, “You’ve just used an evil fantasy to keep you civilized and sane.” Conversely, the way societal ideals are represented in literature can also serve to convince readers of the validity of the stance, creating change in how we see one another. We can see the historic shifts in attitudes toward various ideology, like the chivalric code and religion in the stories of King Arthur, and the societal expectations of women in Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath*, modern characters like Wonder Woman, and many others. The abject representation of women in past literature has helped to develop a cultural taboo that continues to affect women in how

our systems of government are set up, rippling outward to gender roles in the home. The continued portrayal of women in a specific light grew into stereotypes that readers then began to apply outside of literature. In *Gawain and the Green Knight*, we see intense manipulation and trickery from the women, even as they are portrayed as “pure” or “virtuous”. The presence of women in this story presents yet another challenge, albeit a psychological one, Gawain must face on his quest. Presenting women as a challenge to be overcome established a trend of male dominance that seemed to be supported by the texts, which in turn were published as a means of “educating” others about the established gender roles. By using the abject as a means of shocking their readers and simultaneously motivating toward change, modern comics and historic readings both work to the same end. The issues differ in some ways on the surface, but remain familiar, persisting through time and taking different forms.

Abjection and its disruption of society as an instigation of change, is present in all literature, thus reinforcing the idea that abjection is a deeply personal and human experience. The abject and subsequent objectification in this example became reason enough for a hero to rid the world of such a creature. In the epic poem *Beowulf*, the abject serves as a motivator to destroy the unknowns that threaten the Danes and their collective identity. (Unknown) Grendel’s mother lives in a swamp on the outskirts of civilization and is associated with the wetness and filth there. These associations emphasize her differences from the people she threatens and likens her to a kind of human waste; she is something to be expelled literally and figuratively. The author of *Beowulf* also mentions Christian beliefs throughout the poem, and likens Grendel’s mother to an antagonist within the identity of Christianity, implying differences in beliefs as another reason to expel her. Because of these qualities, she threatens the continued prosperity of the established society of Heorot and High Hrothgar and evokes an abject reaction of disgust from Beowulf even as he recognizes her humanity and ability to give birth to others like him. It’s this reaction that decides their shared fate, as Beowulf feels compelled to destroy this thing that is familiar, yet disgusting; this thing that calls into question his own identity.

One of the main protagonists in Alan Moore’s graphic novel *The Watchmen*, Rorschach is hideously ugly and rejected by everyone, including his fellow superheroes, because of his unpopular ideas about the state of the world he lives in. His ugliness furthers his cause; clashing harshly with the rest of the world both visually and ideologically. Rorschach is met with reactions of disgust and treated as an unwanted creature who invades and pollutes the established order of people because of the way he demands change from those around him. Wearing a mask, he is able to disguise his face, becoming an anonymous mouthpiece for his controversial ideas, pushing people to think beyond their own comfortable lifestyle to see a bigger picture. His “radical” ideas however, are the most logical and balanced perspectives in the story, connecting him more closely with the reader’s perspective of the fictional world as a whole. The heroes of the story are all rewarded with fame and adoration from the world, but as the story goes on, the reader can see that they are perhaps more flawed than those who idolize them. They commit acts most consider evil, in the name of goodness; further blurring the line between good and evil within their society. Rorschach sees the acceptance of these acts as a problematic state of normalcy and pushes everyone to judge for themselves how to define goodness.

Similarly, Gulliver's narrative in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, is established as very reliable from the beginning with emphasis placed on how rational and unimaginative Gulliver is. When impossible things begin happening to him, the reader is inclined to continue to believe this narrative from the established world view. Rorschach's rational views conflict with the hierarchy already in place in the world, and demand change; the effect then is that the realities he reveals are abject to those who would turn a blind eye and perpetuate the system they live in. These foreign ways of thinking make perfect sense and come from a fellow man, but recognizing that fact makes the public all the more disassociated from the "truths" that are more hideous than they had imagined. The "truths" become more real and more disgusting for their realness.

Likewise, the disruption of societal norms is present in *Gulliver's Travels* when Gulliver goes to the land of the giants, Brobdingnag. Specifically, Gulliver is disgusted at the skin and smells of the women. They waste no time in sexualizing him, allowing him in their changing rooms and using him as a plaything by putting him on their bodies. Gulliver reacts with fear and disgust, afraid of these giantesses not because of their size, but because of their casual manner around him. The giantesses' bodies are grotesque to Gulliver because what would have been minor flaws to one of the same size, were magnified until they were all that he could see. They had bodily waste just like himself, but the difference in size was so overwhelming, and being ladies similar to his homeland, Gulliver could not distinguish the familiar from the unfamiliar and rejected them completely. The women acted as comfortable as men in his company, and it further disrupts Gulliver's preconceived ideas of a woman's "normal" demeanor in his home country. He struggles to reconcile his familiarity with his own world and family, with the perspective he adopted while in Brobdingnag. His world view is continuously challenged during his stay in Brobdingnag; politically with the king's harsh criticism of England and physically with the giant insects and other grotesque details. After his voyage, Gulliver has a different view of these obscene details and carries that changed perspective with him on his other voyages. In this way Rorschach's investigations parallel Gulliver's, changing his world view so much that he is led to question the idea of heroes and everything he has been taught about good and evil.

As we become more and more desensitized to the violence and sexuality that is in modern media, there is simultaneously a captivation with the abject responses and more importantly, the underlying messages within them. Becoming more widespread is the tendency to look beyond the surface at the initial reaction, and find out the "why" that drives it. Politically we are seeing larger backlash and outcry regarding the equal rights of transgender and homosexual people, exposing prejudices and irrational abject fears. Controversial topics like women's rights to obtain an abortion fascinate, horrify and disgust; forcing many to consider the differences between the self and the other during pregnancy. Seeing interpretations of the abject in literature help to apply one's own beliefs to a hypothetical situation, understanding their own values better. The advantage of this understanding is the application of those values to the laws and rules that govern us. In disrupting the preexisting system, we are able to address "weak" spots and potentially make changes that will lead to progression in thought and fairness to the benefit of everyone.

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