Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection Study Guide

Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection by Julia Kristeva

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Kristeva examines the notion of abjection—the repressed and literally unspeakable forces that linger inside a person's psyche—and traces the role the abject has played in the progression of history, especially in religion. She turns to the work of Louis-Ferdinand Celine as an almost ideal example of the cathartic, artistic expression of the abject.

Kristeva begins with what she calls a "phenomenological" investigation of the abject. This means that Kristeva uses her personal experience—and the expressed experiences of others—to get some idea of what the abject is. From that basis, she goes onto give it a more rigorous definition. The abject, in short, is a kind of non-object that lingers in a person's psyche, the consequence of repression. In order to understand why the abject is not an object, one must under the post-modernist theory of language that Kristeva subscribes to. Kristeva believes that the entire world, including one's self, is understood through language; it is the only lens, so to speak, by which we can understand anything. Now, one is not born speaking; rather, language is a gradual development during the course of one's childhood. Simultaneous with this linguistic development are several crises which Kristeva borrows largely from the psychoanalytic work of Sigmund Freud. Most important of these crises is the Oedipus complex, in which the child begins to lust for his mother but is unable to have her because of his father. Ultimately, he resigns himself to the fact that he will never have his mother and represses the desire for her. As this complex is largely pre-linguistic—or, at least, before linguistic abilities have fully developed—the lingering, repressed remnants of this lust continue to linger in the soul but they never gain the "substance" of expression.

Kristeva argues that the abject exerts a tremendous psychological impact on individuals and, indeed, on societies as a whole. Religion is a natural response to the abject, for if one truly experiences the abject, he is prone to engage in all manners of perverse and anti-social behaviors. Therefore, religion creates a buffer between one's mind and the abject and further represses them. Kristeva follows Freud in her belief that repressed desires tend to manifest themselves unconsciously and symbolically. This can happen occasionally in something like the slip of the tongue—the so-called "Freudian slip"—but it also happens in art. Indeed, art is indispensable to investigating the abject, because its non-linguistic nature prevents it from ever being directly expressed. Kristeva traces the influence of the abject, particularly the abject as related to mother-lust, in the development of Judaism and Christianity. She sees the strict Mosaic laws as reducing, fundamentally, to the incest taboo, the most basic (and obvious) response to one's repressed mother-lust. Christianity builds upon (but also contradicts) Judaism by identifying the abject almost directly—with the new, Christian concept of sin as something inside of oneself—but then strictly forbidding it. In the Christian world, one becomes more divided than ever.

The only refuge one has against the repression of religion and political bodies is art, and Kristeva finds Celine to be an abject author par excellence. His work is, intentionally, revolting. He describes in graphic detail the crudest and most vile aspects of human life

in order to force the reader to consider those parts of his existence which he tries to escape, much like he tries to escape the horror of the abject. He perverts the traditional Oedipal triangle—child, mother, and father as one who desires, one who is desired, and an obstacle or law, respectively—by turning the mother either into something hateful and undesirable, by turning the child into the father (in a perverted episode of incest), or turning the mother into the father. All of Celine's work is focused on revealing the abject to the reader, not by describing the abject directly, but by destroying the structures with which the reader protects himself from it—his own psychology and language.

Kristeva concludes her essay by noting that the usefulness of studying the abject can be found in its immense political and religious influence over the centuries. The institutions which wield power in the modern world, which she believes to be oppressive and inhumane, are built upon the notion that man must be protected from the abject. By facing the abject face-to-face one tears away the support of these institutions and embarks on the first movement that can truly undermine them.

Chapter 1, Approaching Abjection

Chapter 1, Approaching Abjection Summary and Analysis

In this chapter, Kristeva gives what she calls a "phenomenological" account of the abject. This means that Kristeva begins her investigation by relating and describing her own personal experience of the abject in order to give the reader (and herself) a better understanding of it. One of the chief features of the abject is its ambiguity. It is somewhere between being an object and not being an object. However, it should be noted that this has nothing to do with the abject itself; there is not something about the abject which makes it into a "pseudo-object" as Kristeva says. Rather, classifying something as an object or not an object is something that is done through the language of the subject (that is, of the person). A person relates to his or her world through language and therefore when something is excluded by one's language, it is impossible for that person to fully relate to it. In the case of the abject, this kind of linguistic acknowledgment cannot take place but, nonetheless, there is an awareness that "something" exists and this awareness can frightful. Kristeva compares it to the experience of looking at a corpse and seeing a person which "should" be alive and yet realizing that it is not.

The abject is created from repressing certain basic lusts. As a Freudian, Kristeva makes use of the Oedipus complex to explain this genesis. A significant part of maturation for a boy is a distancing from his mother's body. The first separation is at birth, but the boy continues to long for his mother's body and, as he matures, this becomes lust. Out of fear of the father, though, the boy eventually resigns himself to the fact that he can never have his mother's body. So far, this is all very basic Freudianism, but Kristeva introduces her own language of the abject into it. In addition to sexual maturation, a boy undergoes linguistic development; in other words, he learns how to speak, listen, read, and write. Since the boy is forced to repress his desire for the "maternal body" at a young age, he has not yet understood the situation linguistically. This repressed desire lingers, however, and, so to speak, haunts the boy—this is the abject.

This repressed desire can eventually break out of its repression and send the subject into a kind of narcissism. People constantly seek fulfillment and self-realization through some other object, referred to in psychoanalytic literature simply as the Other. A person is always ultimately seeking his own good, but his quest for the Other pulls him away from himself to a certain degree. The quest breaks down in two stages. First, the person realizes that the Other is too difficult to attain and begins to wonder whether he will really have it. Second, the Other disappoints him and shows its insufficiency, thereby destroying his already weak faith in it. As a result, he surrenders himself to the abject—to the unconscious but powerful lusts inside of him. He no longer has any regard for the law (for he previously saw it as a means to possessing the Other or perhaps even the Other itself) and therefore begins to act in anti-social ways.

Historically, man's primary response to the perversion caused by the abject has been religion and morality. Through the creation of laws, man creates boundaries which separates himself from the abject and furthers the repression. It is only through art—through a process known as catharsis—that man is able to express the abject. The abject cannot be expressed linguistically because, as has been noted, it is in a certain sense outside of language. Therefore, the artist expresses the abject symbolically and often unconsciously. Art, then, enjoyed a parallel if someone neglected existence alongside philosophy and religion. While philosophy and religion tried to rid man of his impurities, the artist recognized that this was impossible and, instead, chose to embrace them in the expression of his art.

Many authors, especially modern authors, like Joyce, Borges, and Proust, have consciously included the notion of the abject (even if they called it by another name—Kristeva is really the first to turn it into a term of art) in their writing. Dostoevsky presents two different ways of relating to the abject in "The Possessed:" Verkhovensky is abject because of the failure of his religious ideas, while Stavrogin's abjection has taken the form of perverse narcissism. Joyce takes abjection to its logical conclusion and realizes that it cannot be directly expressed with language and, therefore, imbues his language with, so to speak, the spirit of the abject.

Chapter 2, Something to be Scared Of

Chapter 2, Something to be Scared Of Summary and Analysis

The traditional Freudian model of the Oedipal triangle is, in many ways, flawed. According to this model, all desire is modeled on the pattern of the nuclear family. There is the child who represents the person who desires. There is the mother who represents the object of desire. Finally, there is the father who represents the obstacle to that desire, which ultimately cannot be overcome. Freud, of course, did not think that Oedipus complex was a mere metaphor. Rather, he saw the Oedipus complex as a very real stage in childhood development which, due to how early it occurs in a child's life, produces a kind of mental archetype for all desire that comes after it. The model, however, is too simple. For one, it assumes that the mother really is the first object of a child's desire, but of course, a child immediately desires such basic necessities like food, drink, and air. Further, the separation between the mother and the child does not occur in a single moment nor is it done entirely at the father's behest. A child experiences a certain amount of loss, for example, when he is weaned from his mother's breast, but this process is usually not one that directly involves the father.

Freud is much more successful in his treatment of the subject-object relation when he approaches it from the perspective of fear. There is an assumption among many psychologists that, perhaps due to the trauma of child birth or some such, a child comes into the world in a so-called "zero state"—that is, he is in a perfect equilibrium of desire and satisfaction. This equilibrium, of course, is quickly upset as the child begins to develop biological needs. Depending on the balance of these drives, the child will alternate between fear and desire. Those desires, in early childhood at least, largely manifest themselves in relation to the mother's body which the child eventually learns is something he can never have. The child's fears follow a very similar pattern, for the fears the child has, like his drives, are pre-linguistic and therefore, inexpressible. Like his desires, they can be repressed but never entirely eliminated and, therefore, as a child matures, it is necessary for him to, somehow, adapt to them.

One such adaptation is the development of phobias. Phobias are irrational fears which have a very definite object—one is afraid of horses, says, or dogs or insects. There is a certain sense in which a fear is more manageable when it has a tangible object; the fear of the abject is truly horrifying. The phobias, then, are metaphorical representations of those primal fears which the child was forced to repress, much like art is the metaphorical representation of the abject desires on must repress. It is noteworthy how phobias manifest themselves at different ages. When a child is very young and not very skill with phobia, their irrational nature will be quite obvious. The child will be unable to explain why it is that he is so afraid of a horse and this is precisely because he has no real reason to be afraid of the horse. Adults, however, are more sophisticated, and are

able to use their mastery of language to create elaborate rationalizations for their phobias.

According to classic theory, the drives of an individual can be divided into sexual drives (drives which relate to others but are not necessarily sexual in nature) and drives from the ego, which aims for self-preservation. The development of a phobia leads to a partial victory of the ego over the sexual drive, for the subject begins to believe that he can never possess what it is he originally wanted. This leads to a strange relocation of his desires. The subject begins to, so to speak, buy into his imaginary phobia (though, of course, he is not aware that it is an imaginary construct) and therefore realigns his desires in line with. Insofar as the phobia is situated in his various linguistic rationalizations, the linguistic constructs become the object of his desires. Thus, for example if a person develops a phobia for beautiful women, he may rationalize that he does so because beautiful women tend to be intelligent (or so his personal myth goes). Therefore, he stops seeks beautiful women and begins to believe that the true object of his desire is an intelligent woman in order to remain logically consistent with his phobia.

Chapter 3, From Filth to Defilement

Chapter 3, From Filth to Defilement Summary and Analysis

According to many anthropologists and psychologists, incest and murder are the two acts which are condemned almost universally by all societies. It is is easy to make the case that the incest taboo develops out of the abject, repressed lust towards one's mother; it is little more than a codification of one's own repressed desires. However, even if the incest taboo is the most fundamental and obvious effect of that abject, it is not the only one. Indeed, a case can be made that any number of laws and religious conventions regarding the regulation of sex, diet, and other activities—anything, in short, relating to the rather vague notions of "purity" and "defilement."

Kristeva posits that the fear of impurity is a phobia that develops as a response to the abject of mother-lust. Mary Douglas' work can help explain exactly how this phobia-metaphor works. Insofar as the repressed desires are related to the proper use of one's body, the body becomes an object both of reflection and shame and, as such, certain elements, like excrement and menstrual blood, are determined to be dirty. This is a representation both of the symbolic and the social order. As has been discussed, the abject lives at the margins of language—it straddles, so to speak, the boundary between being an object and not being an object. In the same way, the "dirty" parts of the human body are always those things which extend beyond the body's margin; the various fluids and substances that the body emits. Moreover, there is also a metaphor for society. Man is naturally xenophobic and suspicious of those who exist outside of the boundaries of his society. Everywhere, there is the same theme: What is inside the margin is good; whatever is outside of the margin is bad.

If an individual somehow becomes defiled—perhaps by some indecent contact with one of the above substances or through some improper sexual act—there must be some rite by which he can be purified. Anthropologists have discovered such rites of purification in tribes and societies around the world and even the major religions of the world provide several examples, like circumcision and Baptism.

The ritualization of defilement and purification is also responsible for creating inequality between the sexes. Purity is usually associated with conducting one's sexual affairs in certain ways (especially avoiding incest) and women are often viewed (unfairly) as "schemers" who are out to tempt men into impurity. Therefore, it becomes a kind of perverted act of social preservation that men are given authority over the women in the community in order that they can prevent them from seducing the wrong person.

Notions of social status and hierarchy also play a large part in purity customs, though it is impossible to tell the exact order of causality. In India, for example, where there is, to this day, a strict caste system, it is strictly forbidden for a person of one caste to procreate with a person of another caste. If a Brahmin, one of the people on top of the

caste, were to have sexual relations with someone in a lower class, he would be considered defiled by the act. This acts an effective form of sexual control by regulating who can and cannot have sex with one another. There seems to be some correlation between the importance of social status in sexual relationship and the equality between the sexes. In general, in societies where the autonomy of women is relatively great, there is a corresponding amount of importance placed upon social status. It is as if society always must exert a certain amount of control of reproduction and finds or creates ways to do so.

Chapter 4, Semiotics of Biblical Abomination

Chapter 4, Semiotics of Biblical Abomination Summary and Analysis

There are two prevailing interpretations of the laws regarding ritual impurity in the Old Testament. According to one interpretation, the laws are the arbitrary will of God and being impure is nothing more than disobeying this will. A second interpretation proposes that impurity is identified with contact with evil supernatural forces, like demons. While both of these interpretations do a good a job of showing the complexity of the Mosaic and Levitical law, the most plausible interpretation of the laws is one which employs the psychological insights about defilement which were introduced and argued for in the previous chapter. According to this view, the Jewish laws are a result of the combination of the revolutionary, monotheistic nature of the Jewish religion and the same psychological forces which are at work in the purity rituals of other cultures.

If there is a single, underlying principle which explains all of the various Jewish laws, from the time of Adam to the Levitical Law (and, indeed, even after the destruction of the Temple), there must be some unifying theme throughout all of them. In order to identify this theme, it is first necessary to understand how different Judaism was from all of the other religions of that time. In the Western world, the idea that there is only one God was a revolutionary one. Many Pagan cults worshiped only one god, but they always believed there were many others; the Jews, on the other hand, believed that the gods of the Pagans were demons and, therefore, not really God. They were, then, a people set apart, and they constantly had to fight (sometimes literally) to maintain their identity.

This notion of uniqueness and separateness is what inspires the Jewish law. The Jews believed they were a supernaturally chosen people and therefore they believed they should act accordingly. From the first chapters of the Bible, eating is associated with divinity. Adam is punished for eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and forbidden from eating from the Tree of Life, lest he become a god. Man's separation from God is symbolized by his change in diet; if God eats, then man is no longer allowed to eat like he is.

Though it is often forgotten, the eating of meat was forbidden to man prior to the Flood; it seems to logically follow from the prohibition against murder. The permission to eat some animals is given not as a reward for Noah's faithfulness, but from a recognition of man's evil nature: If he will do it anyway, it is better to make it lawful to do so.

However, the ability to eat meat does not come without restrictions and a significant portion of the laws in the book of Leviticus address this very issue. Man is forbidden, first of all, from drinking the blood of any animal. Further, he is only allowed to eat an

animal that "parteth the hoof, and is clovenfooted, and cheweth the cud." If the animal fails any of these conditions, like the camel, which does not have a parted hoof, it is forbidden to eat it. These laws may seem arbitrary, but they all pertain, even if indirectly, to a notion of order. The only animals that are acceptable to eat are those which follow an established paradigm, any deviations from that paradigm are unacceptable. Thus, the camel, by violating the paradigm of hoofed animals by not having a cloven foot, is forbidden. In like manner, fish, which inhabit only the sea, can be eaten, but shellfish, which travel in both the sea and on land, are not.

In addition to behaving in an orderly fashion, there is the necessity of distinguishing the Jewish people from the Pagans. The Pagans are seen as living very closely with nature, almost like beasts. The Jews, then, should take only what they need from nature and live apart from it as much as possible. Thus, they do not eat any meat whatsoever, but only meat which follows their prescribed, orderly rules. This same principle can be seen regarding the rules of purity surrounding childbirth. Childbirth is a viscerally natural phenomenon and, as such, a woman who gives birth to a child is considered impure for weeks afterward. The taboos on lepers can be explained in a similar way. Though certainly there are many practical reasons for shunning lepers—they carry a horrible and contagious disease—they also represent decay in their very flesh. Moreover, they look different from the rest of Jews and undermine the Jewish unity which is necessary for their existence. In like manner, far more minor physical differences were either forbidden or looked down upon. A man was not allowed to make marks on his skin, for example, and people are even instructed to be wary of a men with especially flat noses.

Jewish rituals also express many of the misogynistic themes found in other cultures in the previous chapter. A newborn girl, for example, is considered unclean while a newborn boy is considered pure so long as he circumcision. Circumcision is a way of purifying the boy from the impurity his mother inferred onto him in the very natural act of birth. The incest taboo, of course, is also a part of the Jewish law, but its fundamental role is obscured by the way it is placed inconspicuously among other sexual regulations. Yet, as the previous chapter showed, the obsession with ritual purity is intimately related to the incest taboo. The incest taboo, in turn, is an irrational psychological reaction against the abject.

Chapter 5, . . . Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi

Chapter 5, . . . Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi Summary and Analysis

When Christianity emerged from Judaism, one of the chief differences was its attitude towards purity and defilement. While Judaism had always conceived of impurity as a material, exterior reality, Christ taught that impurity was something that was in a person's soul. Moreover, the impurity is something which can never be obliterated—there is no equivalent to the many rites of ritual sacrifice in Judaism. A person is born with original sin and, as long as they live, will always bear it. Of course, this does not necessary negate the notion of free will. A person is free to sin or not to sin, at least on many accounts, but this freedom is always tainted by the "original sin" of Adam.

Like Judaism, Christianity makes heavy usage of the notion of division and separation, but to a completely different end than the Jews do. Christianity teaches, first of all, that is man is divided between spirit and body. This separation is mirrored in the doctrine of the Incarnation which states that Christ is simultaneously man and God. The imagery of separation or division recurs throughout the Gospel, for example, in the multiplication of loaves. Thus, a major part of the Christian message is a kind of relativism, an expansion of one's conscience. This relativism is represented by the Christian disregard for the Levitical law which God once claimed would endure for all the time. They have no qualms about eating with Jews, violating the dietary laws, or forgoing circumcision, all of which were strictly forbidden by their supposed spiritual forefather, Moses. Yet, this is consistent with Christ's teaching because he wanted to move away from the single minded absolutism of the Jews; just as he was able to see things as both man and God, he invited his disciples to see ethical issues from several angles.

Though traditionally Christians link all sin to the original sin of Adam, a close reading of the New Testament suggests otherwise. Paul says, for example, that sin did not enter the world until law was created; since law did not exist at the time of Adam, his sin could hardly be the same sin that Christ and the Apostles talk about. The Christian account of sin could be defined as "subjectified abjection" (128)—in other words, sin is the recognition and repudiation of the abject in one's own soul. Such an account has an obvious agreement, at least superficially, with the Christian emphasis on interiority.

Chapter 6, Celine: Neither Actor Nor Martyr

Chapter 6, Celine: Neither Actor Nor Martyr Summary and Analysis

Though the works of Celine were written long before the development of the modern forms of modernist and postmodernist literature, there is a certain poignancy to his expression which has not been replicated even by the foremost modern authors, like Proust. Celine is able to capture the feeling of the abject, and all of the horror that comes with it, through the spirit of his writing. Celine is not exceptional in the content of his novels nor even in the style, but rather it is the mood that the writing conveys to the reader that draws the reader outside, even if momentarily, of the comforts of his existence in the world of language—that is, in the world that he can understand through his language—and get a glimpse of what lies beyond, in the world of abject. Celine's odious ideology—he was a passionate supporter of the Nazis—need not detract from the value of his work. Though his Nazism and Antisemitism pervade much of his work and, therefore, are inescapable, the unique opportunity he offers the reader to gaze into the abyss of the abject is, in many ways, unrivaled.

Chapter 7, Suffering and Horror

Chapter 7, Suffering and Horror Summary and Analysis

For Celine, the very foundation of human existence is suffering; to be human means to suffer. This is because of the necessary connection between human experience and the experience of the abject. Those repressed, unnameable forces which lurk within a person's psyche always make themselves present but can never be fully understood. This causes a person to be divided and feel uneasy in the universe, for he realizes that he cannot fully understand it. The exterior reflection of this suffering is manifested as horror: a horror of what the world has, a fear that one's suffering will continue. Though all of Celine's work is characterized by these emotions, "Journey to the End of the Night" captures these themes the best.

Abject literature, which Celine's novels are a precursor to, is an unstable category. Narrative assumes that there is a sharp distinction between subject and object. There must be a narrator who is distinct from what he is narrating. As has been shown, though, the abject threatens this dichotomy. The abject exists on the margin of language and, since language is what creates objects, it exists as a kind of pseudo-object, something not well-defined and incomprehensible. As a result, any literature which attempts to analyze the abject to a certain extend undermines it self, because, if done well, the distinction between the narrator and the narrated will break down.

One of the chief themes of Celine's work is class struggle. The relationships between the classes was a hot topic of public debate during the 1930s. Communists were calling for economic equality, capitalists were arguing for the status quo, and National Socialists, like Celine, were unhappy with the division that was caused by economic inequality, even if they did not call for the same radical economic restructuring as the communists. This division, in Celine, is represented with violent conflict, the end result of which is "mutual abjection." Through violent confrontation, each person is reduced to the same, miserable state. This is in part true because, as will be explained further on, Celine sees man as a fundamentally bestial creature; it is not surprising, then, that violence, a bestial thing in itself, should strip man of his social and economic statuses.

One thing a reader should immediately notice when reading Celine is how graphic his novels often are. He spares no detail in describing acts of vomiting, death, or defecation. This is neither incidental nor gratuitous. Celine is fascinated with these grotesque acts because they relate man back to the abject. As the reader will recall, the distinction between object and abject is a linguistic one that man makes to exclude certain things from his consciousness. Man, so to speak, wants to forget (or never know in the first) certain things, including things like his lust for his mother during the Oedipal stage. Insofar as the abject lies outside of the realm of language, it cannot be accessed through language, but there are certain parts of the human experience which man attempts to thrust out of his consciousness in a similar fashion. By being reminded of

them—in the most graphic terms—one gets a glimpse of the abyss of the abject. Thus, for example, one is made uneasy when imagining a woman vomiting. Celine forces the reader to imagine the contents of her stomach in exact detail. He refuses to allow the reader to excuse himself and, so to speak, look away.

These graphic descriptions also serve another purpose. As has been stated previous, Celine saw human existence as fundamentally primal. He sees human beings situating themselves in an elaborate web of illusory, constructed identities. At the foundation of all things, though, man confronts his abjection and, therefore, all have the same destiny. To show the truly primal nature of human existence, Celine reminds his readers of their crudely biological nature. He shows readers their vomit and excrement and viscera in order to dispel their notions that are they something above it. It is, in a certain sense, the exact opposite of the what the Jews strove for, as discussed in Chapter 4. The Jews strove to remove themselves from nature and situate themselves, insofar as was possible, with God. Celine, on the other hand, sees a similar tendency in modern man, a desire to put himself above the crude realities of his existence. The project of his literature is largely to undermine this false exaltation.

Chapter 8, Those Females Who Wreck the Infinite

Chapter 8, Those Females Who Wreck the Infinite Summary and Analysis

Celine's novels depict a variety of different kinds of females, but, like his work in general, all of them towards the grotesque. There is, first of all, the type of the mother. Traditionally represented as a life-giver and carer, Celine's maternal figures are vengeful, violent, and even homicidal. This inversion creates an interesting rearrangement of the Oedipal circle. The mother is no longer the inviting object of desire, but an object of manipulation and hatred. Moreover, the dependency relationship is inverted; the mother is dependent on the child for her existence.

Very young girls are often idealized—sexually—in Celine's work. There, most likely, an element of pedophilia in this. It would probably be incorrect to think that Celine himself derived pedophilic pleasure from these descriptions. Rather, as is his wont, he is trying to revolt and disgust the reader by making him imagine the most marginal and abject aspects of life. Thus, the sexualization of young girls often goes even so far as sexual intercourse and incest. One particularly disturbing case of this is a brother who seduces his younger sister but psychologically assumes the role of the father. Once again, there is a rearrangement of the Oedipal triangle. The mother is displaced but this time not on account of her own malice, but through the introduction of a desirable father figure. Moreover, it is significant that the child becomes a father. In a certain sense, this might be seen as a fulfillment of the Oedipal desire to supplant the father, but it is perverted because it involves possession not of the mother, but of the daughter.

There is, finally, the case of the so-called "capable woman"—a woman that is presented as almost masculine by her ability to survive in the world. Given the time of the book's writings—in the early 20th century—such a presentation of an empowered woman would have rocked Celine's readers, who would largely be familiar with women in the roles of mother or sister, but never in the role of an intellectual or worker.

It is not by coincidence that these three archetypes—and there are other examples in Celine's work which could be included alongside them—all relate directly to the Oedipal triangle. As has been discussed, the abject is closely related to the Oedipal experiences—primarily the repression of mother-lust. By distorting and, so to speak, disfiguring the object of this lust, Celine draws the reader's attentions back to those primal repressions. He takes what is attractive to the young child—which attraction still lingers ambiguously in the abject—and replaces it with something not only completely different, but even loathsome or frightening. This is even true of the "capable woman"—she is not really loathsome in herself, but she is seen to lack those traditional maternal qualities that a child identifies. She is, intentionally, mannish.

Chapter 9, Ours to Jew or Die

Chapter 9, Ours to Jew or Die Summary and Analysis

The feature of Celine's work which will be most loathsome and seem least forgivable to the modern reader is his unapologetic Antisemitism. As has been noted, Celine wrote during the rise of National Socialism in Germany (though he himself was French) and was a passionate supporter of the movement, largely because of his agreement with the anti-Jewish sentiments it expressed. He saw his own country as becoming dominated by a secret Jewish conspiracy that existed in banks, the media, and other positions of (usually) non-political authority. He agreed with Hitler that it was time for the non-Jew to reassert his rights and protect himself from the phantasmal, always-imminent Jewish takeover.

It would be rash, however, to completely ignore any value one might find in the Antisemitism. Of course, in the doctrine itself, there is nothing of value. However, seen from a psychological and historical angle, the anti-Semite shares many characteristics with anyone who is driven to the abject. As was noted in the first chapter, one consequence of abjection is a certain kind of lawlessness and comfort with violence (the role of religion, then, is to restrain these urges by pushing away and further repressing the abject).

The hatred of Jews is a metaphor for a very primal struggle against the perceived favored brother. When a child recognizes (or thinks that he recognizes) that one of his siblings is getting preferential treatment from his parents (especially his mother), his natural reaction will be to react against him, sometimes violently—he may hit him, take what he thinks is his, and so on. As the child matures and becomes a part of society, he is no longer able to behave in these ways and, therefore, represses these urges. The repressed anger lingers in the unconscious, though, of course, and therefore finds way for its symbolic expression. In other words, it too becomes an abject. The metaphor with European Jewry is obvious. Insofar as the state is seen as the mother, and insofar as the Jews are seen as receiving beyond their due, they become a prime target for this primal jealousy and violence. It is worth nothing that this abjection is so strong that it will sustain itself even if it has to resort to fantasy. Thus, in Germany, even when Jews were seriously persecuted, it was still commonly believed that the Jews were, somehow, secretly still in total control and, therefore, had to be punished with an increased vigor.

Chapter 10, In the Beginning and Without End . . .

Chapter 10, In the Beginning and Without End . . . Summary and Analysis

Celine himself claimed that his style was the most important part of his writing. To once again return to the subject of the abject, this seems to follow rather logically. The abject is abject precisely because of its relationship—or, rather, its lack of a relationship—with language. Language, then, is the province of objects and what creates the demarcation between objects and non-objects. Celine's goal, then, is to pervert and twist language and, in a certain sense, undermine it—if language remains completely intact, there is no way to experience abjection. This chapter is probably one of the most difficult to understand for an English reader as it betrays the fact that it is a translation. Many of Celine's stylistic oddities are difficult to understand unless one is familiar with French syntactical and stylistic conventions. Nonetheless, the translator does a good job of conveying the substance of Celine's style as best as possible.

Celine's language exhibits a fascination with what might be called "binary" speech. Speech which straightforwardly identifies subject and object. This speech act is reminiscent of the speech patterns of very young children, and the stage at which this act develops is highly significant: It is the moment when a child understands the distinction between subject and object. Linguistically, this may be, so to speak, the closest one can approach to the abject, for by demarcating between subject and object one is entering into the linguistic realm, the symbolic realm, which has no room for the abject.

Many of Celine's stylistic choices are what might be called anti-linguistic or anti-grammatical. Consider, for example, his extensive use of the ellipsis (". . . "). Very often there will be an extended "sentence" that uses such ellipses and goes on for the better part of a page. It is not, technically, really a sentence, because one cannot easily identify the requisite parts: subject, verb, predicate, and so on. This stylistic choice, however, does not defy linguistic conventions in a merely technical way; by writing in this way, he destroys the normal functions of language. The reader is forced to imagine his own subjects and objects for Celine's semi-sentences and therefore there is no attempt to communicate any definite idea to the reader.

Chapter 11, Powers of Horror

Chapter 11, Powers of Horror Summary and Analysis

Celine is only one example out of many authors who deal with the abject. Kafka, Lautreamont, Baudelaire, and many others address many of the same topics. Nonetheless, Celine is, in a certain sense, the perfect abject writer because for him abjection is total. It pervades his depictions of sexuality, politics, history, and personality—the abject is everywhere.

One might reasonably ask what the purpose of studying the abject is. After all, if abjection merely produces horror, it does not seem terribly beneficial, even as a purely academic exercise, to peer into that particular abyss. However, insofar as the abject—and the repression of it—has been a guiding force in the history of mankind, understanding it and the effects it has on history is necessary for fighting the power structures which exist today. For example, it has been seen that religion is primarily a means of hemming in and repressing the abject; if one can confront the abject, one undermines the need for religion and makes it obsolete.

Characters

Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud was an Austrian psychologist whose theories formed the basis for the psychiatric method known as psychoanalysis. According to psychoanalysis, neurosis—sickness of the mind—is the result of some unresolved conflict, usually from one's childhood. The conflict is usually repressed into the subconscious but continues to manifest itself through dreams, art, or a variety of other ways. The neurosis is especially dangerous because it can lead to various behaviors which can make the subject, for the subject is attempting to symbolically resolve the conflict in his actions. For example, if a person was resentful of his older brother as a child because he believed he received preferential treatment from their parents, the person may project his aggression into structurally similar situations. Moreover, these situations may only really be in his imagination. Such a person, for example, may see inequity and victimization where there, in truth, really is not any and, as a consequence of this perception, he will hate and act out towards those he believes are victimizing him or those he believes are benefiting as a result of his victimization.

Freud's thought is clearly crucial to Kristeva's thought, but it is important to realize that she does not follow it dogmatically. Freud's research took place before the great linguistic and philosophical revolutions of the mid-20th century that resulted in the emergence of post-modernism. The synthesis of post-modernism and Freudianism was largely the result of Jacques Lacan's work and Kristeva's work is a continuation of that same project.

Louis-Ferdinand Celine

Louis-Ferdinand Celine was a French writer in the early- to mid-20th century in whose writings Kristeva sees a strong interest in the abject. It is important to realize, first of all, that the abject cannot be expressed directly. First of all, the abject is, by definition, outside of language—an abject is not an object precisely because it has been excluded from one's consciousness and language. Furthermore, the abject is something which is a very personal and variable thing; there is not a single abject which all people share. Rather, each individual's experience of abjection is bound to depend upon their personal experiences, historical situation, and language.

Celine's method of exposing the abject to his reader, therefore, is indirect. One such strategy is to destroy the protections the reader puts up against those things he does not want to see or think about: The abject is a consequence of exclusion and, therefore, Celine is interested in stopping the process of exclusion by presenting images and thoughts to the reader which are uncomfortable or even disgusting. Thus, he goes to great lengths to describe the processes of vomiting and defecation. Celine's works are very violent and gory. Man is inclined to imagine himself as something separated from

"bestial" nature and therefore Celine is interested in reducing man, perhaps excessively, to his biological components. He places a great emphasis on mans' bowels and viscera in order to remind the reader that such is what he is made of. Celine also attacks language directly. Language, so to speak, excludes the abject and therefore in order to expose the abject, it is necessary to undermine language itself. For this reason, Celine takes great liberties with literary and even grammatical conventions. He often has sentences which extend for the better part of page, though they lack proper punctuation, structure (some have no verb or predicate), and meaning. Celine has abandoned, intentionally, the notion that language can communicate an objective thought from author to reader, rather leaving the meaning of his work up to the whims of the reader.

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Fyodor Dostoevsky was a Russian novelist in the 19th century. Kristeva sees in his work an early, if imperfect, recognition of the abject.

James Joyce

James Joyce was an Irish modernist writer whose works, Kristeva claims, largely embody the "spirit" of the abject through their unconventional style.

Marcel Proust

Proust was a French author who was heavily involved in the post-structuralist literary movement.

Jorge Luis Borges

Krista provides Borges as an example of an abject author.

Jacques Lacan

Jacques Lacan was a Freudian psychologist and linguist whose work was largely related to the synthesis of Freudian psychoanalysis with post-modernist insights into the nature and purpose of language.

Oedipus

Oedipus is a fictional character from Sophocles' play "Oedipus Rex." He murders his father and has sex with his mother. He is the archetype for the Oedipus complex which is central in Freudian psychology.

Mary Douglas

Mary Douglas was a British anthropologist whose work focused on the relationship between the laws and rituals of primitive cultures and notions of symbolic purity.

Ferdinand de Saussure

Saussure was a French linguist whose work laid the foundation for the linguistic insights of post-modernism. His thought is critical to understand Kristeva's work.

Objects/Places

The Abject

The abject is a non-linguistic, repressed desire and fear in one's psyche.

Language

Language, according to Kristeva, is the only way one can understand the world and, therefore, one's language biases and prejudices one to see the world in a certain way.

Oedipus Complex

The Oedipus complex is the development conflict in which one desires one's mother sexually but is restrained from having her by one's father.

Narcissism

Narcissism is the result of the dissolution of the Oedipal triangle and results in no longer seeking an "other" object. One is, rather, content with oneself.

Phobia

Phobia is an irrational fear which is a metaphorical representation of the abject.

Incest Taboo

The incest taboo is a nearly universal prohibition in all cultures and it is one of the most obvious and direct results of the abject.

Judaism

Judaism, Kristeva argues, is a religion based on escaping from the abject and setting a symbolic order in its place.

Levitical Law

Kristeva sees the various dietary, sexual, and ethical components of the Levitical law as all fundamentally reducible to the incest taboo.

Christianity

Christianity, Kristeva argues, is a hybrid of Pagan nature-worship and Judaism. Its rejection of sin is directly related to fear of the abject.

Antisemitism

Antisemitism, though indefensible doctrinally, is, Kristeva believes, is one logical conclusion of the experience of abjection.

Themes

The Importance of Language in Understanding the World

As a post-modernist, Kristeva believes that the only way one can relate to or understand the world is through the medium of language. Anything that is completely non-linguistic is literally unintelligible. There are several important consequences of this theory. First, since language is not a private entity, but rather the product of a society, language transmits the ideology of society. Since one understand the world through language, it is therefore impossible to see the world in an unbiased way; one is always seeing the world through a set of biases and prejudices that one inherited from society. Another consequence of this is that it makes understanding radically different cultures and societies difficult, if not impossible. If two cultures have radically different languages then they also have radically different ways of understanding the world. Taken to an extreme, some post-modernists (and Kristeva is one of them) argue that logic itself is not a monolithic entity but subject to the same biases as anything else. Thus, at one point in the book she condemns so called "mono-logism."

The importance of language is crucial to understand the nature of the abject. "Abject" appears to basically be a pun on the word "object." An abject is not an object because it is, by definition extra-linguistic (that is, it is "outside" of language). This follows easily from postmodernist principles; if something is not comprehended by one's language, it cannot be understood. However, one still has an awareness that the abject is something, even if it is not something that is in any way comprehensible. This is possible because, though humans are linguistic beings, they are not born with a language. When a child is very young, he is only developing his linguistic capabilities. Nonetheless, that does not mean he does not have experiences. Some of these pre-linguistic experiences are the Freudian conflicts which are crucial to understanding later neuroses. The child learns to repress many of these conflicts when he is very young and, thus, has not classified them linguistically. The abject, then, is precisely that: those lingering repressed fears and desires.

The Role of the Abject in Political and Religious History

In the final chapter of the book, Kristeva raises the question which the reader likely has been wondering throughout the book. The abject is constantly presented as horrible and terrifying—why, then, should one want to experience it? What is the point of literature like Celine's which attempts to disgust the reader into giving up his psychological defenses and embrace the abject horrors that lurk in his soul? It does not even seem like a worthwhile academic enterprise given the consequences. Kristeva certainly is not going to argue the horrifying nature of the abject, but she argues that it must be

confronted because it is the primal foundation upon which all political and religious power is built. As she explains in the first chapter, abjection can lead to a certain kind of narcissism. If the Oedipal triangle is broken down, one no longer seeks an "other" as the object of one's desire, but oneself. Since obedience to the law is a result of the frustrated desire for that other, narcissism also results in lawlessness and various kinds of anti-social behaviors.

The role of religion and government is to restrain such behaviors and the most effective way to do this is to continue to repress the abject. Religion and government, so to speak, make the lines between abject and object bolder and, thereby, supposedly protect people from themselves and from others. However, Kristeva believes that these power structures are fundamentally corrupt and oppressive and, therefore, the only way to undermine them is to face the abject and show that it can be experienced without sacrificing social stability.

Oedipus Complex as Fundamental to the Abject

Kristeva's philosophical heritage is composed primarily of post-modernism and Freudian psychoanalysis. Her work is largely a continuation of the project begun by Jacques Lacan and others to apply the linguistic insights of post-modernism to the psychoanalytic method of Freud. It is important, then, to realize that Kristeva is not a "pure" Freudian; indeed, she explicitly disagrees with him several times in the book. Nonetheless, any reading of the text will immediately reveal that she is, nonetheless, much indebted to his work. One of the most important Freudian insights Kristeva uses is the Oedipus complex. According to Freud, when a child (particularly a boy—but there is thought to be an equivalent experience for a girl) grows up, he begins to sexually desire his mother. This is because, so far, his mother has been the source of everything good in his life, starting with life inside of the womb. As his sexual faculties begin to develop, she, then, is their natural first object. However, the child is prevented from ever possessing this object because of the father; he stands in the way from the child ever being with his mother sexually. The child becomes jealous of the father—he even hates him, perhaps—but eventually resigns himself to the fact that he will never have his mother. At this point, the child gives his first obedience to what is known as the reality principle: one cannot have everything one wants. This act is the first act of becoming part of the society and part of the economy; it is, therefore, also the first step towards assimilation.

For Kristeva, this Oedipal triangle—child, mother, and father as desirer, desired, and obstacle or law, respectively—is paradigmatic of all desire. There is always the subject (the child), the object (the father), and the law. This paradigm can break down if the object is seen as too difficult to obtain because of the law or if the object is recognized to be insufficient. The result of this a condition called narcissism, in which the subject is sufficient for himself. The abject is directly related to the Oedipal complex. Since the Oedipal stage occurs usually very early in childhood, before any mastery of language, the repression of one's mother-lust happens before it can be categorized linguistically. However, one still lives with that desire, but it becomes incomprehensible.

Style

Perspective

Kristeva is firmly within the post-modernist literary and linguistic movement. Post-modernism is largely founded on the insights of a Swiss linguist named Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure developed a theory of language according to which meaning was the result of difference and exclusion. A sign—like a word—has meaning only if it does not mean something else. "Cat," for example, has the meaning that it does because it is not any other word. Structuralists believed, however, that there was some ultimate foundation for language which gave the entire system meaning. Post-modernism (which is closely related to another philosophy called post-structuralism) rejects this last belief; they believe that language is fundamentally completely arbitrary and that there is no final ground of meaning. Instead, language is purely a social construct. As they believe that language is the only way one can understand the world (including, even, one's self) it follows that all experience is ultimately a product of one's social and historical situation.

Understanding Kristeva's linguistic beliefs is crucial to any attempt to understand her work in this book. The unique nature of the abject is directly related to this linguistic philosophy—the abject is not an object precisely because it is outside of language. Objects are not, so to speak, "objective"—things are not objects in and of themselves, but only depending on how one understands them through language.

Tone

Kristeva's tone manages to combine being both rigorously academic with being, at times, elegantly poetic. Though certainly a reflection of Kristeva's own identity as a person and a writer, this style is consistent and, in some ways, a consequence of her philosophical beliefs. Post-modernism is a rigorously theoretical and scientific enterprise which employs a large amount of technical vocabulary. This fact will probably jump out to the reader, and indeed, many readers will find the text completely unreadable as a result. Consider, for example, the following excerpt: "The abject might then appear as the most fragile (from a synchronic point of view), the most archaic (from a diachronic one) sublimation of an 'object' still inseparable from drives. The abject is that pseudo-object that is made up before but appears only within the gaps of secondary repression. The abject would thus be the 'object' of primal repression" (12). In this very brief passage, which is composed only of three sentences, Kristeva uses seven different words that belong to an obscure technical jargon. Moreover, as post-modernism is inter-disciplinary, the reader is required to understand the vocabulary of several different disciplines. In the quoted passage, for example, Kristeva employs phrases both from her particular branch of Saussurean linguistics and from Freudian psychoanalysis. It is tempting to believe that Kristeva is being needless obscure or pedantic with her writing

style, but one must understand that her writing was intended for a very specific audience which, in the 1980s, was significantly more prominent than it is today.

Structure

The book is divided into eleven chapters, but can be divided into four larger categories. In the first two chapters, Kristeva lays down the theoretical foundations for her theory of abjection. In the first chapter, this is done, primarily, through the method of phenomenology. That is, Kristeva attempts to understand the abject through her own experience and literature. This is a particularly useful way to approach the abject because it, by its nature, defies direct, verbal analysis. The second chapter expands upon the theory of abject and uses it to rework Freud's theory of phobias, which Kristeva believes to be seriously flawed.

The theory of phobia is crucial for the second section of the book, which is composed three chapters that are primarily anthropological in nature. The third chapter discusses how abjection-inspired phobias are the cause of the nearly-universal incest taboo. She then uses these insights about the incest taboo to understand the Jewish religion in the fourth chapter. She sees Judaism and Paganism colliding in Christianity in the fifth chapter where she attempts to understand the tenets of that religion according to her theory of the abject.

The third section of the book is dedicated to analyzing the work Louis-Ferdinand Celine, a French writer who wrote mainly during the early- to middle-20th century. In his work, Kristeva sees an effective expose of the abject. Five chapters are dedicated to this task; the first is an introduction of Celine and his work and the remaining four each address a specific aspect of his work. The first of these chapters—the seventh chapter of the book—addresses the recurring motifs of horror and disgust found in Celine's work. The eighth chapter discusses the relationship between Celine's presentation of women and his presentation of the abject which, as the reader will recall, is closely related to primal mother-lust. The ninth chapter discusses Celine's Antisemitism, and though Kristeva certainly does not defend it, she sees it as an expression of abjection. The tenth chapter analyzes how Celine manipulated and undermined language in order to direct his reader towards the abject.

The final chapter of the book gives a brief justification for the work. It asks the question, on behalf of the reader, why one should be interested in experiencing the abject. Everything Kristeva has presented so far shows the abject as terrifying and miserable—what profit could there be in seeking it out? The answer lies in its historical, political, and religious influence. As Kristeva has argued, the abject is a driving force behind the dominant power structures which still exist in the world—government, religion, and economics—and until the abject is confronted, face-to-face, they will continue to reign.

Quotes

"There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced." (1)

"If, on account of that Other, a space becomes demarcated, separating the abject from what will be a subject and its objects, it is because a repression that one might call "primal" has been effected prior to the springing forth of the ego, of its objects and representations." (11)

"Metaphor of want as such, phobia bears the marks of the frailty of the subject's signifying system." (35)

"This abjection, which threatens the ego and results from the dual confrontation in which the uncertainties of primary narcissism reside—is it such as to motivate, if not explain, the incest dread of which Freud speaks? I believe so." (63)

"The body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic. In order to confirm that, it should endure no gash other than that of circumcision, equivalent to sexual separation and/or separation from the mother. Any other mark would be the sign of belonging to the impure, the non-separate, the non-symbolic, the non-holy . . ." (102)

"Even more so, does not that multiplication of dietary objects also constitute (taking into account the inward displacement of emphasis) a sort of invitation to multiply, if not relativize, conscience itself? It is no longer one but polyvalent, as is the entirely parabolic, fictional meaning of the miracle." (118)

"Celine's effect is quite other. It calls upon what, within us, eludes defenses, trainings, and words, or else struggles against them." (134)

"For, when narrated identity is unbearable, when the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and when even the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain, the narrative is what is challenged first." (141)

"Giving life—snatching life away: the Celenian mother is Janus-faced, she married beauty and death. She is a condition of writing, for life given without infinity aspires to find its supplement of lacework within; she is also the black power who points to the ephemeral nature of sublimation and the unrelenting end of life, the death of man." (161)

"Anti-Semitism, for which there thus exists an object as phantasmatic and ambivalent as the Jew, is a kind of parareligious formation; it is the sociological thrill, flush with history, that believers and nonbelievers alike seek in order to experience abjection." (180)

"Next to complete clauses that are nonetheless concatenated by the three dots, one notes two kinds of ellipses. On the one hand, the points of suspension cut off a constituent from the main clause or from the predicate; thus isolated, the constituent loses its identity as object phrase, for instance, and while it does not gain a truly autonomous value it still floats in a syntactic irresolution that opens a path to various logical and semantic connotations, in short, to daydreaming." (199)

"Because of knowing it [abjection], however, with a knowledge undermined by forgetfulness and laughter, an abject knowledge, he is, she is preparing to go through the first great demystification of Power (religious, moral, political, and verbal) that mankind has ever witnessed; and it is necessarily taking place within that fulfillment of religion as sacred horror, which is Judeo-Christian monotheism." (210)

Topics for Discussion

In her discussion of Christianity, Kristeva provides, in many ways, a novel understanding of the Christian religion. Is her interpretation valid?

Describe the relationship between Kristeva's thoughts and Freudian psychoanalysis.

What does Kristeva see as the unifying theme for the Levitical laws?

What is the purpose of the five chapters dedicated to discussing the work of Celine?

Why does Kristeva believe that Celine is, in a certain sense, the ideal abject author?

What linguistic assumptions are present in Kristeva's work? Do you think they are sound?

Kristeva rejects Celine's anti-Semitism but still thinks there is some value in studying it. Why?