

“The Abject”—A Brief Definition

The term **Abjection** literally means "the state of being cast off," and has connotations of degradation, baseness and meanness of spirit.

The Abject in Critical Theory

In contemporary critical theory, **abjection** is often used to describe the state of often-marginalized groups, such as people of color, prostitutes, convicts, poor people and disabled people. In this context, the concept of abject exists in between the concept of an object and the concept of the subject, something alive yet not. This term originated in the works of Julia Kristeva. Often, the term **space of abjection** is also used, referring to a space that abjected things or beings inhabit.

According to Kristeva, since the abject is situated outside the symbolic order, being forced to face it is an inherently traumatic experience. For example, upon being faced with a corpse, a person would be most likely repulsed because he or she is forced to face an object which is violently cast out of the cultural world, having once been a subject. We encounter other beings daily, and more often than not they are alive. To confront a corpse of one that we recognize as human, something that *should* be alive but isn't, is to confront the reality that we are capable of existing in the same state, our own mortality. This repulsion from death, excrement and rot constitutes the subject as a living being in the symbolic order.

This act is done in the light of the parts of ourselves that we exclude: that is, the mother. We must abject the maternal, the object which has created us, in order to construct an identity. This is done on the micro level of the speaking being, through her subjective dynamics, as well as on the macro level of society, through "language as a common and universal law." We use rituals, specifically those of defilement, in order to maintain clear boundaries between nature and society, the semiotic and the symbolic. This line of thought begins with Mary Douglas's important book, *Purity and Danger*, as well as in Kristeva's own *Black Sun*.

The concept of abject is often coupled (and sometimes confused with) the idea of the uncanny, the concept of something being "un-home-like," or foreign, yet familiar. The abject can be uncanny in the sense that we can recognize aspects in it, despite its being "foreign." An example, continuing on the one used above, is that of a corpse, namely the corpse of a loved one. We will recognize that person as being close to us, but the fact that the person is dead, and "no longer" the familiar loved one, is what creates a sort of cognitive dissonance, leading to abjection of the corpse.