

“THIS IS WHY I AM DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHERS”:

THE ABJECT CHILD AS  
SYMBOL OF CULTURAL ANXIETY

by

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A thesis submitted to the  
Graduate School-Camden  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
Graduate Program in English  
written under the direction of  
Holly Blackford  
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Camden, New Jersey [May 2012]

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“This is why I am different from the others”:

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This thesis examines Tom Riddle of the *Harry Potter* novels by J.K. Rowling (1997-2007), Joe Christmas of *Light in August* by William Faulkner (1932), and Charlie Gordon of *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes (1966) in the context of Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject. The abject is that which challenges the border between the self, or the state, and that which is outside of it. As such, encounters with the abject trigger reactions of fear, horror, anxiety, or disgust. I argue that these characters—whose identities defy categorization because they are between wizard and Muggle, black and white, and genius and moron—are abject, and thus elicit terror in those who encounter them. Their abjection precludes them from belonging to any sort of community. Moreover, each text highlights its character’s ambiguous, abject identity by associating him with the filth that threatens the body, i.e. blood, vomit, feces, etc. This juxtaposition

shows how the characters, as the filth of their societies, are cast out in the name of protecting the clean and proper state. In an increasingly global society, in which borders are porous and rights are expanding, I argue that this refusal to challenge or minimize the border between the self/state and that which is outside of it increases both the self and the state's vulnerability. By perpetuating ideals of acceptable identities, we create the abject and subject ourselves to feelings of terror and anxiety when the clean and proper body, or the clean and proper state, is undoubtedly threatened. I suggest that the abject—and the resulting terror—cannot be overcome unless we challenge the binary system that currently creates communities. We must not try to use discipline or exclusion to regulate or protect from difference. Instead, we must confront our fear and expand the definition of “normal” to include multiple kinds of identities, and diminish anxiety and vulnerability by embracing the reality of the porous border.

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## Introduction: Disturbing identity, system, and order

“My princess boy is four years old,” proclaims Cheryl Kilodavis in her 2009 children’s book *My Princess Boy*, written about her son Dyson. “He likes pretty things. His favorite color is pink. He plays dress up in girly dresses. He dances like a beautiful ballerina.” In a note on the book’s back cover, Kilodavis says that the idea for the book came from the fear that her son “would be teased or bullied for wearing a dress to school” and that she wanted to tell the world her family’s story about compassion and acceptance.

As Dyson—who loves to wear dresses, high heels, and jewelry—and his family became more well-known, his parents were both celebrated and ridiculed for allowing Dyson to dress this way, to identify with the feminine more than the masculine. At best, the blogosphere praised the Kilodavis family as “the most awesome family in America” (Metzger) for their unconditional love and acceptance. At worst, pundits like Debbie Schlussel reacted with disgust, calling *My Princess Boy* a radical step towards the “deviancy . . . that continues to afflict and destroy America.” She worries that by proceeding with this “warped” idea of acceptance as the definition of America’s future, then “there won’t be an American future [at all].”

Occupying a much wider middle ground are feelings of anxiety and fear. Leanne Italie of *The Seattle Times* wonders if Dyson’s parents are leading him into “dangerous territory” and quotes another parent who worries that Dyson will be condemned to a future as an “outcast.” Jessica Carlson, blogging on the site *The Imperfect Parent* asks, “Must our children be burdened with this?” Though she hopes Dyson can find “peace and understanding,” she maintains that “gender roles are a NORMAL [emphasis in original]

part of growing up. It's a healthy distinction and children . . . shouldn't be made to feel that gender is interchangeable and something that is only imposed by big, bad people in a big, bad society." Though this blogger acknowledges that children can be cruel to one another, she argues that "if you're going to test the boundaries and celebrate it, you can't expect to have the world join you."

When the Kilodavis family's website asks us to consider, "Boy or girl? Does it matter?" the answer from most people seems to be a resounding "yes." It is important, many say, to avoid ambiguity in matters as important as gender. While most parents would be happy with either a son or a daughter, the idea of a child who seems to be both at the same time is upsetting or even disturbing. While more understanding and awareness of transgender individuals who biologically identify as one gender and mentally identify as another, has emerged in recent decades, we still find ourselves asking what there is to do with a child like Dyson, who neither identifies as a girl nor acts like a boy. The mere knowledge that children like Dyson exist has clearly triggered reactions of fear and anxiety, and even horror and revulsion, from people who do not even know him.

In her essay *Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva attempts to explain these feelings of fear, horror, and disgust as reactions to the disturbances of "identity, system, [or] order" (4). When we encounter something that is "not me. Not that. But not nothing either" (2), we are reminded that boundaries we recognize as absolute—including those between one's own body and the outside world or the body of another—are in fact tenuous. There is something, perhaps something undefinable, in the middle.

Building on Jacques Lacan's theory of child psychological development that traces the child's transformation from an object of the mother to a subject in his or her own right, Kristeva defines these things that trigger reactions of horror or disgust as "abject." The abject's quintessential quality is that it is "opposed to I" (Kristeva 1). The abject causes a distinct reaction of unease, because the abject is or reminds us of something that we once thought familiar, like our mothers, but is now "radically separate, loathsome" (2). The abject disgusts. It horrifies. It terrifies. We find it in the unclean, the impure, the uncontrollable, the separate, or the "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). That which is "radically separate" or "loathsome" can be something as simple as the skin that forms on the top of a glass of milk; or blood; or vomit; or a corpse; or a person like Dyson Kilodavis, who does not embody what we have come to expect as normal. When we react to these people or things with fear and disgust, Kristeva argues that we are unconsciously reacting to a threat to our own subjectivity, or the idea that we are individuals who possess agency and the power of language. Encounters with the abject remind us of the tenuous boundary between "I" and "not I." Our blood, for example, should be inside, but it is not, just as a corpse should be alive, but it is not. The abject does not respect boundaries—those between inside and outside, life and death, clean and unclean, and subject and object, for example—and is thus a source of fear.

Kristeva argues that all of this disgust stems back to our original need to distinguish ourselves as separate beings from our mother. In the womb and even just after birth, the child, who does not recognize his own body or his own separate identity, is an extension of the mother. In these early stages of life, the child experiences a state of total oneness with the mother, a state similar to Lacan's concept of "the Real" in that the child

experiences no boundaries and no meaningful selfhood. Kristeva calls this the “chora” (14). As the child develops, the mother’s power over the child is “as securing as it is stifling” (13) and the child must separate himself from her in order to avoid losing “the totality of his living being” (64). To remain in a state of oneness with the mother, however blissful it may seem, is to be devoured by the mother, “sinking irretrievably” into her (64). To be threatened with a return to this state of lost identity is to be confronted with the abject. It follows then that Kristevan theory posits that the child cannot identify something as abject until he or she has established a separate identity from his or her mother.

This is usually done through the acquisition of language (Felluga). Kristeva describes the transition from the mother’s world to the father’s world—culture—in this way:

A representative of the paternal function takes the place of the good maternal object that is wanting. There is language instead of the good breast. Discourse is being substituted for maternal care, and with it a fatherhood belonging more to the realm of the ideal than of the superego. . . . There is fear and fascination. The body (of the ego) and the (sexual) object are completely absorbed in it. Abjection—at the crossroads of phobia, obsession, and perversion—shares in the same arrangement. . . . [Abjection] is the symptom of an ego that, overtaken by a “bad object,” turns away from it, cleanses itself of it, and vomits it. In abjection, revolt is completely within being. (45)

Lacan claims that the child transitions out of this infantile state when he “recognizes his own image as such in a mirror” and begins to understand his potentiality as a subject (Lacan 75-76). Once this happens, the child can recognize himself as simplified and bounded, as opposed to an indiscriminate part of the “turbulent chaotic perceptions, feelings, and needs” in the chora (Felluga). Though the mirror stage represents a critical



break between the child and the mother, development of language solidifies that separation.

Kristeva adapts Lacan's theory to insert another stage between that of the newborn infant and the mirror stage. Before the child learns to speak, and before the child recognizes his image in the mirror, Kristeva posits that the child has already begun his attempts to separate from the maternal entity (13). It is this stage of life that Kristeva associates most closely with abjection because, though separation from the mother has begun, it is not yet complete. Though the child has not yet recognized his own image, he has realized that he is a separate person from his mother and does not share her body; he is in between, existing in a world in which boundaries must be created. When we encounter anything that reminds us of this in-between state of semi-communion with the mother, i.e. of being returned to the chora after we have established ourselves as separate beings, we experience abjection.

According to Christine Bousfield, it is critical for the child to "[abject] the maternal body in order to . . . maintain her clean and proper body from non-difference" (331). This, as we have already said, is done through language. Once the child acquires language, the child is a subject and is wholly separated from the Real and the maternal body. Any reminders of the child's pre-linguistic existence after this point can be considered threatening moments of abjection for the child because they blur the boundary between subject and object, or the me and the not me, that the child has created for himself. These reminders trigger for the child a "narcissistic crisis" (Kristeva 13) in which the child does not know who he is.

With this definition in mind, I propose to examine themes of abjection in novels featuring male children whose very identities are in-between. I will deal specifically with the *Harry Potter* novels by J.K. Rowling (1997-2007), *Light in August* by William Faulkner (1932), and *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes (1966). These texts, I argue, contain traditional manifestations of the abject—namely bodily fluids, excrement, and corpses. More importantly, the texts compound their themes of abjection by including children who are viewed as threatening or unclean by themselves and others.

Tom Riddle, Joe Christmas, and Charlie Gordon all straddle binaries—black/white, human/animal, genius/idiot, civilized/savage, wizard/Muggle, and alive/dead to name a few—and must struggle with composite identities, which constantly threaten the clean and proper body and destabilize the clean and proper state. Although each text contains traditional manifestations of the abject—blood, sweat, feces, vomit—I argue that the novels introduce bodily excrement at moments in which the male children themselves are presented as abject. Sometimes, these moments of intense abjection occur when the child recognizes his own composite identity as abject. These moments are often, but not always, linked to the child's mother or to the feminine, which is consistent with the idea that the child cannot recognize the abject until he has formed a separate identity from his mother. Once the child has established a separate identity, usually through his acquisition of language, the child is horrified when he is reminded again of his time spent in the chaotic maternal space. As males, these children experience abjection even more strongly because their separation from their mothers demands a total separation, while a daughter's body, though separate, is still like that of her mother's. Mentions of

excrement, in these moments that highlight the child's identity, serve primarily to compound the greater instance of abjection, rather than function as the sole instance of it.

Along the same lines, these children function as symbols of the greater societal destabilization happening in each novel. Each text is set in moments of political, cultural, or social instability that threaten to annihilate the collective identity that society has formed for itself. Just as the child struggles with an identity that is “essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic” (Kristeva 8), so does society struggle against imminent catastrophe by casting out the child that threatens its homogeneity. The abject child threatens to destabilize the binaries on which society relies to maintain law and order. These societies expel the “mixed” child—the Mudblood, the mulatto, the moron—whose penetration of the orderly and stable society threatens to plunge that society into chaos.

In this sense, I argue that society creates its own trauma by creating a set of norms on whose continued dominance order and stability depends. By collectively accepting a definition of what is “clean and proper”—in these novels, pure wizard blood, whiteness, and average mental ability—the society also creates and contains the outcast Other, and renders itself vulnerable to the horror and disgust it feels when it is penetrated by a person that falls somewhere in the indefinable middle. The problem, then, stems with the overreliance on socially constructed binaries that attempt to categorize gender, race, intelligence, and sexuality as “either/or” parts of identity: male/female, white/black, smart/stupid, straight/gay. These binaries are man-made and thus vulnerable; the society that fails to recognize this and expand its definition of orderly and stable—and of clean and proper—is the society that reifies its own vulnerability. The “mixed” child cannot be expelled; another will always be created, and to permanently exclude him/her is to

permanently reinforce the trauma of the abject, porous border of the body politic. Dyson Kilodavis, the Princess Boy, is just one example of an unstable identity in a long line of instabilities most poignant in literature of male development.

## The “radically separate, loathsome” child

### 1. “You think I was going to use my filthy Muggle father’s name forever?": The *Harry Potter* novels’ Tom Riddle

J.K. Rowling’s Tom Riddle of the *Harry Potter* novels is a wizard of “mixed blood” who grows up to become the evil sorcerer Lord Voldemort. As a child, Tom Riddle is categorized as a half-blood—a wizard who has one Muggle (non-magical) parent—and must negotiate an identity that is part ordinary Muggle and wizard. Making Tom even more extraordinary is his direct connection to Salazar Slytherin, one of the four ancient witches and wizards who founded Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. As Tom comes into his own as the heir of Slytherin, he abjects—or attempts to cast off—the Muggle part of himself that threatens his singular, uncomplicated identity as a powerful wizard. As an adult attempting to rid himself of the Muggle part of his identity even further, Tom Riddle rejects the name he shares with his father and assumes the new name Lord Voldemort. Voldemort’s actions as an adult, in which he attempts to conquer death and rid the wizarding world of Muggle-born wizards, compound his own abjection and cause others to view him as the terrifying evil incarnate.

Beginning in *Chamber of Secrets* when Draco Malfoy uses the word “Mudblood” as a slur against Hermione Granger, many of Rowling’s characters conflate dirt or lack of cleanliness with mixed parentage. Malfoy and other characters like Tom/Voldemort view those wizards who have Muggle blood to be not only socially inferior to those who have unambiguous “pure blood,” but also physically repulsive. At various points in the series, pure bloods call Mudbloods “scum” or “filth” and refuse to touch them or shake hands with them. It is useful to note that, according to Kristeva, “it is . . . not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” (4). However,

the lack of cleanliness that comes with bleeding and other “casting out” human behaviors that protect the body from that which threatens it *is* abject, especially when the blood itself is considered dirty. Because a wizard of mixed parentage disturbs or challenges wizard identity, a Mudblood is, in the view of pure-blood enthusiasts, doubly abject.

Tom Riddle spends the first eleven years of his life entirely unaware of his wizard identity, although when he learns he is a wizard, he does tell Dumbledore that he “always knew [he] was different” and “special” (*Half-Blood Prince* 271). By the time Tom begins attending school at Hogwarts, he has rejected his non-magic identity as not special.

Though much has been made in the novels themselves and in critical discussions of the possibility that Tom Riddle, Sr.’s abandonment of his son inclined Tom towards evil, I wish to argue that it is Tom’s value of and desire for extraordinary abilities, not the lack of a father’s love, that cause him to view Muggles as filthy and subordinate. Despite his attempts to classify the non-magic as “not I,” Tom must always negotiate his composite identity. The non-magic is the “me,” and at the same time, it is the “not me.”

As he takes his place in the wizarding world, because he is both wizard and Muggle, Tom experiences moments of intense abjection when he “finds the impossible within” and realizes “that the impossible constitutes [his] very *being*” (Kristeva 5). His identity is often disrupted when he is reminded of his Muggle parentage, and later, of his own mortality. Tom’s attempts to abject his Muggle parentage are attempts to protect his identity as a subject from that which seeks to threaten it. However, because his status as a half-blood prevents him from fully assimilating into wizard culture, his desire to have a clear, unambiguous, powerful identity is, and always will be, denied.

Tom Riddle's psychological development follows a similar pattern to what I have laid out in the introduction. However, Kristeva's theory equates the maternal with Tom Riddle, Sr., not Tom's mother, Merope Gaunt. Because the maternal can be considered that which lacks the phallus, it makes sense, then, to interpret Tom Riddle, Sr.'s lack of a wand—a phallus-like object in shape and in that it is equated with power—as feminine and to thus interpret Riddle, Sr. himself as the mother in this case, not the father. Gail Jones notes that Lacan does not assign the phallus signifier only to the male, and that “the role of separator [can be assigned] to the ‘Father’ or to ‘Culture.’” Either way, “something in his account must intervene in the ‘real’ mother-infant dyad and liberate the child from the danger of psychosis” (456). The wand in the *Potter* novels functions in exactly this way; the powerful wizards have wands, and the non-powerful Muggles and other magical creatures like house elves and goblins do not have wands. The possession of a wand means membership in the wizarding culture and liberation from the Muggle world. The possession of a wand is clearly associated with a sense of power from the moment when eleven-year-old Harry holds his first wand to Voldemort's murderous quest for the “unbeatable” Elder Wand in *Deathly Hallows*. Tom Riddle, Sr.'s lack of wand is equated with exclusion from Culture.

With this in mind, Tom Riddle, Jr.'s attempt to establish himself as a subject dictates that he must separate himself from his feminized father. Dumbledore's visit to the orphanage sets into motion the pre-mirror stage that Kristeva argues is a prime moment for abjection. “I know that you are not mad,” Dumbledore tells him. “Hogwarts is not a school for mad people. It is a school of magic. . . . You are a wizard” (*HBP* 270-271). Though Riddle does not yet realize from which parent he is separate, it is this

moment in which Riddle realizes that he has a different identity from at least one of them. Despite his incorrect assumption that his mother “can’t have been magic, or she wouldn’t have died” (*HBP* 275), this is the moment in which Tom begins to understand that not only is he an individual who possesses agency, but also that there is a whole world that is “not me.” It is this world from which he will soon separate himself when he goes to Hogwarts to study. This visit from Dumbledore triggers Tom’s “birth” from the maternal space of the orphanage, the place where Tom was born and cared for by a group of Muggle women, and puts him on the path to learning language and culture in the wizarding world of his male ancestor, Salazar Slytherin.

As eager as Tom is to leave the orphanage and go to Hogwarts, the orphanage’s matron, Mrs. Cole, who has acted as Tom’s mother figure up to this point, is just as eager to “birth” him out of her orphanage and to separate him from herself. She treads carefully during her conversation with Dumbledore, not wishing to jeopardize his willingness to take Tom away. As Dumbledore attempts to lower her inhibitions by serving her alcohol, at first, all she is willing to say about Tom is that he is “funny” and “odd.” When Dumbledore presses her for clarification, before she says anything more, she makes Dumbledore reaffirm his promise that Tom’s “definitely got a place” at his school before she tells him that Tom “scares the other children” (*HBP* 287). She explains how Tom was suspected of hanging another child’s pet rabbit, and how two other children “were never quite right” after going into a seaside cave with Tom. It is in this cave that Tom revealed some unspecified magical powers to these children, separating his own identity from theirs, even though he did not have the vocabulary to express what he was doing at the time. In any case, Mrs. Cole realizes early on, just as Tom does, that he does not belong



there and that he is not like the other children for whom she cares. She anticipates that many people who have encountered Tom, herself included, “will [not] be sorry to see the back of him” (288). Dumbledore’s reply, however, signifies that Tom cannot fully separate from this Muggle space in which he was brought up. Although Dumbledore does not tell Mrs. Cole where Tom will be going exactly, he does remind her that this other place “will not be keeping him permanently” (288) and that “he will have to return here [to the place of his birth] at the very least, every summer” (288).

Although it is not detailed in any of Rowling’s novels, Tom Riddle’s mirror moment—the moment when he recognizes himself as an individual separate from the maternal—occurs when he realizes definitively that he is the heir of Slytherin. In *Half-Blood Prince*, when Dumbledore researches Tom’s childhood in an attempt to learn his weaknesses, Dumbledore tells Harry that Riddle was “obsessed with his parentage” and eventually discovered not only that his father was a Muggle, but also that he was descended from Salazar Slytherin on his mother’s side (362-63). The separation can only be complete, however, when the child acquires language. In the *Potter* novels, this occurs when Riddle begins to speak Parseltongue. The language allows Riddle to open the Chamber of Secrets, the act that fully defines him as Slytherin’s heir. At this point, Tom has not only abjected his Muggle father, but also his witch mother, choosing instead to reach back through his genealogy to seek out a symbolic father, Salazar Slytherin.

Although this introduction to Tom’s childhood and his discovery of the wizarding world does not come until Book Six, our first glimpse of Tom’s adolescence comes in Book Two, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, when the school’s mysterious hidden chamber is opened once again and we learn about the model student who would

become Lord Voldemort. The Chamber of Secrets—the site of Tom’s mirror moment and the space where Tom reveals his new name to Harry—is rife with abject imagery. First of all, it is located in the bowels of the school and can only be entered through a bathroom, the place where all excrement—the most tangible manifestations of the abject—can be discreetly disposed of. Second, as Alice Mills suggests, “the basilisk can be understood as an excretory abject.” The snake “[slides] along inside the damp, slimy pipes and [emerges from the bowels]” just as feces would, and when the individual encounters the abject basilisk, he or she dies (9). Compounding these images of the abject is Slytherin’s association with “toilets and sewage pipes by way of the basilisk that comes ‘slithering’ out of the Slytherin statue’s mouth” (11). Tom’s attempts to wrest himself firmly on one side of the wizard/Muggle boundary *here* of all places highlights the horror of his composite identity.

In addition to actually murdering his father (who is really more like his mother in that he lacks a wand), Tom also attempts to completely blot out his father’s existence by rejecting his father’s name and assuming a new name: Lord Voldemort. As a child, Tom tells Dumbledore that “there are a lot of Toms” (*HBP* 275). Dumbledore postulates that as soon as Tom discovered his connection to Salazar Slytherin, he “dropped the name [Tom] forever, [and] assumed the identity of Lord Voldemort” (*HBP* 362). The change of name symbolizes Tom’s recognition of himself as a subject who has attempted to separate from the maternal. Later, when the memory of his sixteen-year-old self meets Harry in the Chamber of Secrets, he explains more fully why he changed his name:

“You think I was going to use my filthy Muggle father’s name forever? I, in whose veins runs the blood of Salazar Slytherin himself, through my mother’s side? I, keep the name of a foul, common Muggle, who abandoned me even before I was born, just because he found out his wife was a witch? No, Harry — I

fashioned myself a new name, a name I knew wizards everywhere would one day fear to speak, when I had become the greatest sorcerer in the world!” (*CoS* 314)

Tom’s name change is another move away from the ordinary or common and towards the extraordinary, the special, the powerful. Tom’s ability to give himself a “new name” indicates his newfound ability to determine his own identity and to reject an identity given to him by someone else, a name that literally marks him as his father’s double. Here, he values the clean blood from Salazar Slytherin, the purest of the purebloods, over the “filthy” and “common” blood on his father’s side. Unfortunately, though, even after changing his name, Tom cannot remove this common blood from his identity. He represses this unclean part of himself, and Harry even wonders on multiple occasions whether Tom/Voldemort’s followers know that he is a “half blood,” but this unclean Muggle part of his identity can never be expunged entirely.

After Tom opens the Chamber of Secrets, firmly placing himself in Lacan and Kristeva’s symbolic order, he experiences numerous moments of abjection in which he is reminded of his former, and yet ever-present, Muggle identity. In review, the child can only recognize an incident or object as abject once that child has fully separated from the mother. In this sense, the abject is anything that reminds the child of the stage in his or her life in which he or she was beginning to break away from the maternal body, but had not yet fully recognized him or herself as an individual in his or her own right. The first of these moments occurs when Tom is denied permission to stay at Hogwarts over the summer. While explaining to Tom that he cannot remain at school because it is unsafe, Professor Dippet asks him, “You live in a Muggle orphanage during the holidays, I believe?” (244) Tom, embarrassed, replies that he is a half-blood. This reminder that his identity is unstable prompts Tom to frame Hagrid for the opening of the Chamber of

Secrets in the hope that if the attacker is caught, he will be allowed to remain in the wizarding world. He is forced to temporarily deny his true identity as Slytherin's heir in order to avoid a permanent return to the abject maternal space of the Muggle orphanage, the place from which he was so eager to escape. However, as stated, Tom can never cast his father and his history out entirely. Even when he purposely hides his identity as the heir of Slytherin so that he can stay at Hogwarts over the summer, he receives a Special Award for Services to the School with "T. M. Riddle" engraved on it (*CoS* 231). Though Tom desires a special name that will separate him from his father and identify him to other wizards as "the greatest sorcerer in the world" (*CoS* 314), ironically, he earns a permanent place in Hogwarts school lore under his Muggle designation.

As Slytherin's heir, Tom rejects everything that he views as ordinary or Muggle, or even anything human, because he associates these things with his father, whom I have already identified as feminine in that he lacks the wand-phallus. According to Gail Jones, feminists criticize Lacan because Lacan requires the child to separate from the mother in order to become a subject in his own right. They say that, with this line of thought, "we are forced to position the mother as 'object' with no possibility of her ever becoming a 'subject' who can occupy a position within the symbolic" (457) and that "the male child's . . . identity is precariously constructed out of a cultural demand that he repudiate rather than make reparation with the mother" (460). Though a feminist critique is not the purpose of this study, these criticisms coincide well with Tom's view of his father. Tom Riddle, Sr., like other Muggles, can never occupy a position in the symbolic order. In fact, especially after Tom Jr. kills his father, he views his father only as an object. In

*Goblet of Fire*, for example, Tom, now using the name Voldemort, must use his father's bone to regenerate a body for himself. He tells Harry:

“You stand, Harry Potter, upon the remains of my late father,” he hissed softly. “A Muggle and a fool . . . very like your dear mother. But they both had their uses, did they not? Your mother died to defend you as a child . . . and I killed my father, and see how useful he has proved himself, in death.” (648)

Here, Voldemort compares Lily Potter, Harry's Muggle-born mother, to his own father, recognizing them not as individuals, but as objects that function only to serve their children. He murders both of these Muggle or Muggle-born parents in cold blood, “stamping [them] out . . . like . . . cockroach[es]” (*DH* 739), but later realizes that he must consume them in order to transform from vapor to physical form.

In the past, Tom/Voldemort has tried to regenerate a body for himself through various other abject means, including drinking unicorn blood in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. When these attempts fail, however, Tom is forced to confront the power of the maternal—of Lily Potter's love for her son, which has given Harry “lingering protection” (*GoF* 657) for thirteen years. He “[wants] Harry Potter's blood . . . the blood of the one who had stripped [him] of power” (657), and admits that he was “foolish to overlook” the power of Lily's love and sacrifice (653). To want Harry's blood is the same as to want Lily's common Muggle blood. By taking this blood, Tom/Voldemort consumes the maternal, desiring the protection the mother provides the child while simultaneously acknowledging maternal love and the power it gives Harry as a threat. Tom also consumes his own “mother,” Tom Riddle, Sr., in the same graveyard where Tom takes Harry's blood. Tom Riddle Sr.'s bone is “unknowingly given” (641) to his son, not so that Tom/Voldemort can rejoin his father or seek some sort of communion with him in the Muggle world, but so that he can further separate himself from that

Muggle world through the creation of a new body that is invulnerable to death. The graveyard scene in which Tom/Voldemort completes his transformation back to a human body with the power of agency is made possible only by a confrontation of the bond between mother and child, a bond from which Tom/Voldemort previously tried so hard to separate himself.

With this in mind, Tom's abject identity is traced most prominently to the blurring between wizard and Muggle. Because Tom renders abject the Muggle/ordinary part of his identity, the text does not include moments where Tom Riddle (or Voldemort) compounds his abjection by vomiting, urinating, defecating, sweating, or any other biologically human functions. Most significantly, though, Tom rejects the most ordinary end that all humans must meet: death. Dumbledore believes that Tom views death as a "shameful human weakness" (*HBP* 363). On the night he returns to his body, Tom recalls "the steps [he] took, long ago, to guard [himself] against mortal death" (*GoF* 648). These steps are later identified in *Half-Blood Prince* as the creation of Horcruxes, or objects that contain a piece of one's soul and protect their creator from mortal death. Although Tom's feelings on death before the creation of his Horcruxes are not presented in great detail, his determination "to evade death" (*HBP* 500) is apparent in his assumption of a name that means "flight from death" (Bunker).

Voldemort's Horcruxes are created by "ripping" the soul through the murder of another human being. The Horcruxes, which are created in an attempt to render him immortal, are themselves abject because they are not alive though they contain a piece of his soul. As Professor Horace Slughorn explains to a young Tom Riddle, "the soul is supposed to remain intact and whole. Splitting it is an act of violation, it is against

nature” (*HBP* 498). Just as the soul should be clean and proper, so too should the objects that become Horcruxes also be clean and proper. However, once these fabulous but benign objects—a diary that proves Tom’s genealogical connection to Salazar Slytherin, Slytherin’s locket and ring, Helga Hufflepuff’s cup, Rowena Ravenclaw’s diadem, and even the snake Nagini—are transformed into Horcruxes, they become strangely human-like, with the ability to mentally and physically destroy those who possess them. The diary possesses Ginny Weasley in *Chamber of Secrets*, leeching strength and vitality from her and forcing her to reopen the Chamber. The locket torments Harry, Hermione, and especially Ron, preying on their worst fears when they wear it. The ring tempts Dumbledore and his desire for power, and when he succumbs and tries to wear the ring, its fatal curse blackens Dumbledore’s hand. Nagini, a murderous female snake, devours her victims.

The objects, once they become Horcruxes, have human-like features. For example, the locket has a “tiny heartbeat” (*DH* 278) and a “living eye” (*DH* 375), and the memory of Tom that emerges from the diary tries to kill Harry. Most importantly, when Horcruxes are threatened, they fight back, and when they are destroyed, they seem to die human-like deaths. To destroy the diary, Harry stabs the “heart of the book” with a basilisk fang (*CoS* 322); the diary screams and gushes inky blood from its pages, and the memory of Riddle dies along with it. Similarly, when Harry and Ron are about to stab the locket, Harry “[imagines] blood pouring from [its] windows” (*DH* 375), and when Fiendfyre, or cursed fire, destroys the diadem, Harry observes “a bloodlike substance, dark and tarry” leaking from it (*DH* 635). Although readers do not see the other

Horcruxes, namely the ring and the cup, die because Harry is not present when they are destroyed, we can deduce that they too must possess human-like features.

As more and more Horcruxes are created, they cause Voldemort's body to become even more horrifying as he transforms from youthful and handsome into something ugly and subhuman. When the killing curse he casts at the infant Harry rebounds, he remains alive precisely because he has previously created several Horcruxes. Although Voldemort is "ripped from [his] body" and rendered "less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost" by the curse (*GoF* 653), he is alive nonetheless and eventually regains some grotesque physical form before he is restored to a human body. The Horcruxes serve their purpose, making Voldemort if not immortal then, as Harry succinctly puts it, "impossible to kill" (*HBP* 502).

To be sure, it is Tom-turned-Voldemort's status as abject that prompts the creation of Horcruxes as an attempt to rid himself of the weakness of death. Once the Horcruxes are created, however, Voldemort still cannot fully rid himself of his father's Muggle identity, nor can he avoid encountering reminders of the abject: other Muggle-born or half-blood wizards. The creation of the Horcruxes is also the trigger that prompts everyone else to view Voldemort as horrifying, or abject, instead of just evil. His apparent achievement of immortality, his ability to manipulate others minds and bodies, and his vaporous form that becomes his regenerated body are all examples of the abject. Alice Mills writes that, before he gets a new body at the end of *Goblet of Fire*:

Voldemort keeps looking for other bodies and life-forces to share, perpetually trying to annul the separateness of his followers' and opponents' physical forms. Attempting to infiltrate the well-organized, well-disciplined Hogwarts, with its laws for the protection of students (in Kristevan terminology, this would be a manifestation of the symbolic order), Voldemort can be understood as the process of abjection incarnate. (6)



Mills is thinking specifically of Voldemort's possessions of Professor Quirrell in *Sorter's Stone* and Ginny Weasley in *Chamber of Secrets*. Both of these sharings are marked by a need to consume or use blood; Voldemort forces Quirrell to drink unicorn blood to strengthen him, and forces Ginny to use blood to write threatening messages on the school walls when she reopens the Chamber of Secrets. However, Voldemort does not have to lack a body in order to assume the role of "abjection incarnate." Voldemort shares a connection with Harry and uses that connection to enter Harry's mind and manipulate his thoughts, even after Voldemort is restored to a physical form. When Harry shares Voldemort's most intense thoughts or feelings, he experiences pain in his scar often to the point of physical illness. These moments when Harry acknowledges the blurring of the distinction between his clean and proper self, and Voldemort's, are moments of abjection for Harry, in which the thing that he is trying to expel is Voldemort himself.

Throughout the series, Harry struggles repeatedly with his closeness with Voldemort, fearing this closeness as a challenge to his own separate identity. Tom Riddle as Voldemort has an abject identity of his own, as I have already outlined, but when he infiltrates Harry's mind as what Mills calls the "abject incarnate," he becomes the force that causes Harry to feel disgusted with himself and excluded from others. In *Order of the Phoenix*, Harry often dreams from Voldemort's point of view. In one such dream, he is acting from within the body of Voldemort's snake, Nagini, who attacks Arthur Weasley, Ron and Ginny's father, one night. Harry is the one who strikes, the one who "[plunges] his fangs deeply into [Arthur's] flesh" (483). Here, the snake is a "smooth, powerful, and flexible" phallic object that Voldemort controls and uses to penetrate Harry.

Casey Cothran examines the scene in which Dumbledore enlists the help of a magical instrument to assess the meaning of Harry's experience inside Voldemort's snake. When the instrument emits green smoke that takes the form of a snake, Dumbledore says to himself, "Naturally, naturally . . . but in essence divided?" and the smoke snake immediately "split[s] itself instantly into two snakes, both coiling and undulating in the dark air" (*OotP* 470). Cothran suggests that this image of the two snakes can be read as Voldemort and Harry, or as the two evils that Harry must contend with. Cothran argues that one snake "represent[s] a visible evil, the character of Voldemort," while "the other may represent the invisible and dangerous . . . elements in Harry's own psyche" (129-30). Cothran's work was published in 2005, and it was revealed in 2007 in the final book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, that the two snakes she suggests are actually one and the same. Harry, who is unknowingly a Horcrux himself, has a piece of the "visible evil" within him, as an "invisible and dangerous" leech on his own soul. After Harry-as-snake attacks Mr. Weasley, a man who has acted as a guide or a parental figure for him in the past, he wakes up, experiencing extreme pain in his scar, and promptly vomits twice (483-84). This vomiting further compounds the abjection: Harry expels the vomit in response to the pain caused by sharing a mind with Voldemort. When this connection is made apparent, even before Harry understands what causes it, Harry often feels pain to the point of nausea in his scar, but it is this, the first real indication that the boundary between Harry's and Voldemort's minds can be easily breached or blurred.

Unable to determine whether he acted as the savior or the killer, Harry fears his connection with Voldemort, and is ashamed of his role in the attack on Mr. Weasley.

Although he tells the truth to Dumbledore, when he later recounts the story to the Weasley children, Harry anticipates that they too will fear him and he makes a conscious effort to sound “as though he had watched from the sidelines as the snake attacked, rather than from behind the snake’s own eyes” (475). As Harry contemplates the possibility that Voldemort might be possessing him, he feels himself losing control of his bowels as “his insides writhe and squirm like serpents” (492) and he begins to sweat (493). Harry recognizes the abject within him, and instinctually tries to physically expel it because he feels threatened:

He felt dirty, contaminated, as though he were carrying some deadly germ, unworthy to sit on the underground train back from the hospital with innocent, clean people whose minds and bodies were free of the taint of Voldemort . . . . He had not merely seen the snake, he had *been* the snake, he knew it now. . . . (492)

Harry continues to contemplate the loss of his “clean and proper” self, which he believes is being controlled by the monstrous Voldemort that he cannot suppress. The feelings of being dirty, contaminated, or at the very least excluded from normal society, signify the corruption of his own identity and its terrifying conflation with Voldemort’s identity.

This sharing of minds is the culmination of other sharings between Harry and Voldemort that become apparent to Harry and others throughout the series. Starting with Harry’s first day at Hogwarts, when the Sorting Hat considers placing him into Slytherin House, and continuing through encounters with the child and adolescent Tom through the diary and Dumbledore’s Pensieve, Harry is troubled by his similarities with Voldemort in parentage, circumstance, mannerisms, and even physical appearance. All of these things, but in particular this sharing of minds, trouble Harry throughout the series and cause him to fear that his identity is so close to Voldemort’s that it is not wholly his own.

Voldemort's successful infiltration of Harry's mind seems to confirm Harry's lingering fear that his connection with Voldemort is real and unexplainable.

After the attack on Mr. Weasley, the disgusting moment in which Harry is most connected to Voldemort and their identities are most closely entwined, Harry begins to feel that he is, and must be, permanently excluded from everyone else:

*[Ron] doesn't want to be on his own with me, Harry thought. Not after what he heard Moody say . . . He supposed none of them would want him there anymore now that they knew what was inside him . . . The feeling of being unclean intensified. (497)*

Harry understands that to share a connection with Voldemort is to render his identity unstable and threatening, even filthy. Sharing a mind with Voldemort, Harry feels like he does not belong with Ron and Hermione anymore than he belongs with Voldemort himself. He believes that the only solution is to "cut himself off from other wizards entirely" (494) and to return to Privet Drive in a state of permanent exclusion.

Harry fears that, with Voldemort sharing his mind, he will soon lose control of his body and become a danger to his friends, perhaps attacking them the way Mr. Weasley was attacked in his dream. At the end of *Order of the Phoenix*, this fear comes true when Voldemort lures Harry into a trap and penetrates him in an attempt to get compel Dumbledore to murder Harry. In this moment, Harry becomes completely disoriented. He has lost control of his body, figured here as his bowels, knowing only that he is experiencing unbearable pain and that he is "locked in the coils of a creature with red eyes" (*OotP* 815-16). The image of the coils recalls the way Harry's insides "writhe and squirm like serpents" when he thinks about the attack on Mr. Weasley. He "[does] not know where his body ended and the creature's began. They [are] fused together" (816). In this moment, the two are indistinguishable, and Harry's own body no longer has a

defined and distinct border. The creature can speak “[using] Harry’s mouth” and though Harry cannot control the words that come out, he “[feels] his jaw move” when Voldemort challenges Dumbledore to “kill the boy” (818).

In the aftermath, Dumbledore articulates what Harry does not: that Voldemort’s possession of Harry could be his “destruction” (828). However, the potential for Dumbledore to kill a possessed Harry in the hope of killing Voldemort is not the only potential source of destruction. To lose one’s identity, to have it challenged by another *something*—“the Other, having dwelt in [him] as alter ego” (Kristeva 10)—traumatizes Harry and forces him to grapple with his identity throughout the series until, in *Deathly Hallows*, Harry realizes that he is a Horcrux and that he must permanently and completely cast out Voldemort from his own body and from the wizarding world by sacrificing his own life.

By the end of the series, Harry comes to understand that, with a piece of Voldemort existing inside him, the connection between the two is, according to the all-knowing Dumbledore, “a parasitic growth” (*DH* 687), and the piece of Voldemort’s soul that lives in Harry must be cast out to give Harry a chance to survive with a whole, untarnished identity. When Harry sees this piece of Voldemort’s soul, finally cast out precisely because Harry willingly surrendered to the threat of abject annihilation, it looks like a grotesque child with “raw and rough” skin, who is “unwanted, stuffed out of sight” (706-7). Harry is simultaneously curious and “repulsed” (707).

With a soul that is completely his own, Harry returns to the battlefield to confront the weakened and fragmented Voldemort, and his snake Nagini. These bodies contain the only two remaining pieces of Voldemort’s soul. The figure of the snake is consistently

given phallic power throughout the series, as Voldemort is successfully able to control these animals to the point that they become extensions of himself. Snakes like the basilisk in *Chamber of Secrets* and Voldemort's own snake Nagini repeatedly attack and murder on Voldemort's behalf. Moreover, the ability to talk to snakes is a signifier of the ultimate belonging to wizard culture: a connection to Salazar Slytherin, the champion of pureblood wizards. Although Dumbledore suggests that it is "inadvisable" to make a Horcrux out of an animal "that can think and move for itself" (506), he is certain that Voldemort has made a Horcrux out of Nagini. Dumbledore notes that Voldemort has "an unusual amount of control over" this particular snake and "certainly likes to keep her close" (*HBP* 507).

Despite all of Voldemort's efforts, Harry's ability to systematically destroy the Horcruxes points out that Voldemort is unable to truly and permanently expel the "shameful human weakness of death" (*HBP* 363). Voldemort knows, as Dumbledore tells Harry, that "without his Horcruxes, [he] will be a mortal man with a maimed and diminished soul" (*HBP* 508-09). In fact, it is Voldemort's terror over his own vulnerability, exemplified by a desire to keep Nagini close by, that Dumbledore identifies to Snape as the signal that Harry must be told that he, too, is a Horcrux. When Neville beheads Nagini at the end of *Deathly Hallows*, the act is equivalent to Voldemort's castration. He has lost control of the phallus, and this is a signal that the end is near and that he will soon be expelled from the wizarding world for good. His expulsion is finally complete when Harry disarms Voldemort, and the Elder Wand, the death stick, the most powerful wand ever created, flies through the air, "spinning across the enchanted ceiling like the head of Nagini" (*DH* 743).

In these final moments, before Harry disarms Voldemort, he tries to force him to confront his abject identity. He addresses him not as Voldemort, but as Tom Riddle, denying him the repression upon which he has survived up to this point. Up to this point, Voldemort has gained power by claiming to be super-human, but here, Harry charges him to “be a man” (*DH* 741). His death scene emphasizes the mortality, the humanity, the commonness that Riddle has struggled against since childhood. When killed, “Tom Riddle hit[s] the floor with a mundane finality, his body feeble and shrunken, the white hands empty, the snakelike face vacant and unknowing” (744). The emphasis on Tom Riddle’s mortal body, on his corpse, reinforces the idea that his fragmented identity has been annihilated, and expelled from Culture. He Who Must Not Be Named, and he who could not be killed, has been destroyed by “his own rebounding curse” (744). Once Harry sacrifices himself and stands in front of Voldemort’s killing curse, the abject part of his identity that belongs to Voldemort is destroyed. Harry’s body has been restored to its original clean and proper state, and what’s more, he becomes the mother figure for all of the anti-Voldemort fighters. Harry understands that by allowing himself to be killed, he has “done what [his] mother did” (*DH* 738) and has cast life-saving protection over all of them. While Voldemort fears this bond with the mother, Harry embraces its power and ultimately survives because of it. His willingness to sacrifice himself for others in the same way that his mother did for him casts the abject Voldemort out of his body. It is this restoration, and the “incomparable power of a soul that is untarnished and whole” (*HBP* 511) that Rowling holds up as the reason why Harry is able to ultimately defeat Voldemort’s fragmented and defiled soul.

Tom's/Voldemort's struggle with his abject identity triggers essentially all of the action in the *Harry Potter* series, from the first killing curse that ends James Potter's life to the final disarming charm. Ultimately, Tom's inability to fully remove the Muggle component of his identity, i.e., his inability to move his identity out of the abject space, causes him to project his disgust at his own dirty blood onto all other half-bloods and Muggle-borns in the wizarding world. Anyone who is not a pure-blood is, according to Voldemort, only an abject reminder of his own abject identity. In addition to trying to expel his own ordinariness, he also makes it his life's work to eliminate all reminders of his own abjection within the wizarding world, and mounts a campaign for ruthless genocide that is the center of the series. It has been often noted that this desire to "purify" the wizarding race has direct parallels to the real-life genocide of the Holocaust, and that in this parallel, Voldemort can be compared to Adolf Hitler. Of course, the series presents absolutely no evidence that the belief that Muggles are inferior originates with Tom/Voldemort; we at least know of Dumbledore's defeat of another pure-blood enthusiast, Gellert Grindelwald, in 1945, years before Voldemort comes to power.

Holly Blackford argues that Tom Riddle is not born evil, nor is he born with the belief in racial superiority, but rather, he is the product of the society in which he lives, that of a "school culture" that emphasizes "needing pedigree, winning, and dominating" (157). It is no wonder, she argues, that Tom, thrust into a society that already emphasizes lineage and status, would feel "shame" about his "lack of purity, family, belonging, and accoutrements" (157) and thus internalize the belief system that eventually spurs him to murder. It follows then, that although Tom's "distaste for 'Mudblood' . . . [is] a value judgment stemming from cultural conditioning" (170), he is not unconscious of his own



blood status. Perhaps, as the child of a Muggle who hated magic and the heir of one of the four founders of Hogwarts, Tom views himself as an extreme manifestation of a learned prejudice. In any case, Voldemort becomes the chief perpetuator of violence against those with “dirty blood” in the series.

This violence destabilizes the orderly, lawful wizarding world, and even spills over into the unknowing Muggle world. In addition to throwing wizard society into terrified chaos, Voldemort’s tendency to operate in secret blurs the boundary between good and evil. Harry’s godfather, Sirius Black, tries to help Harry and his friends understand what life during Voldemort’s first rise to power was like:

Imagine that Voldemort’s powerful now. You don’t know who his supporters are, you don’t know who’s working for him and who isn’t; you know he can control people so that they do terrible things without being able to stop themselves. You’re scared for yourself, and your family, and your friends. Every week, news comes of more deaths, more disappearances, more torturing . . . the Ministry of Magic’s in disarray, they don’t know what to do, they’re trying to keep everything hidden from the Muggles, but meanwhile, Muggles are dying too. Terror everywhere . . . panic . . . confusion . . . that’s how it used to be. (526-27)

Kristeva argues that “any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility” (4). It is exactly this kind of crime that characterizes both Voldemort’s regime, and, as Harry points out, the Ministry of Magic’s response to that crime. Voldemort is quickly able to not only undermine law and order, but also to subvert it, to cause government officials (like Barty Crouch in *Goblet of Fire*, Dolores Umbridge in *Order of the Phoenix*, and the hawkish Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour in *Deathly Hallows*) to behave ruthlessly and even cruelly in the name of preserving order.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the series takes a much darker turn after the real-life terror attacks of September 11, 2001. Many critics have pointed out the mirrors between Harry and Voldemort's world and the real world, and have argued that Rowling takes on the nature of good and evil as a central theme in her work. Courtney Strimel writes that "the themes of terror as a result of large-scale, national strikes and the battle between good and evil are central to Rowling's work" (36). Strimel argues that the novels allow real-life children "to deal with timeless, realistic, frightening topics while maintaining a safe distance from the agent causing the anxiety" (37).

Jennifer Sattaur argues that the terror in the *Potter* novels is especially jarring because it comes from the knowledge that "the threat is coming from within" (6). She states that it is this same terror, the idea that "a terrorist could be your own next-door neighbor [and] an attack can come from anywhere, and from anyone" (6), is a parallel that Rowling draws throughout the series. Where I believe Sattaur goes wrong, however, is her claim that the series relies too much on the firm, established binaries of good vs. evil and us vs. them. Sattaur is dissatisfied with Rowling's attempts to "blur the lines" in the later books, probably through the characters I mentioned above, but in fairness, she is writing from a limited frame of reference that does not include the last book, which had not yet been published and which complicates Dumbledore as the embodiment of good. Sattaur argues, I believe incorrectly, that Rowling sets the series up for an ending in which "Evil [will be] destroyed altogether" (10). Though Tom is destroyed, the prejudice against Mudbloods and the overreliance on pedigree—in short, the schools of thought that Blackford argues create Tom Riddle and prompt the recognition of himself as abject—continue to exist and continue to threaten the orderly, lawful, peaceful society.

Rowling does not use her novels to suggest that evil can be defeated, but rather points out the need to recognize the tenuous, and often blurred, boundary between good and evil and to acknowledge that the only way to truly remain on the good side of that boundary is to continuously repress or delay evil. She suggests as much when Dumbledore tells Harry that “if [Voldemort] is delayed again, and again, why, he may never return to power” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 298) and when Snape calls the Dark Arts “eternal . . . unfixed, mutating, indestructible” and compares them to a “many-headed monster, which, each time a neck is severed, sprouts a head even fiercer and cleverer than before” (*HBP* 177).

In the end, Tom Riddle, the child whose identity is in constant flux, becomes Lord Voldemort, the murderer who is widely regarded as the most evil wizard of all time. He never escapes his own abject identity, but rather deepens it as he immerses himself in the sinister. In his struggle to separate himself from the maternal space, Lord Voldemort becomes yet another manifestation of the abject for everyone else. Kristeva says that the amoral is not abject, but the immoral is because it blurs the line between order and chaos (4). Voldemort’s reign is especially terrifying, and he is especially abject, because he is the murderer who used to be the handsome Tom Riddle, who was once the brilliant student who served as Head Boy of Hogwarts. He embodies the idea that evil can come from anywhere, even from someone who has been previously recognized by others to be so good. Voldemort is, as Kristeva says, “the killer who claims he is a savior” (4), a corrupting force who perverts the accepted value system and thus horrifies himself and terrifies everyone around him.

**2. “He thought that it was loneliness which he was trying to escape and not himself”: *Light in August*’s Joe Christmas**

Just as Tom Riddle’s trauma over his status as half-blood destabilizes the fantasy wizarding world that Rowling creates, Joe Christmas, the biracial child in William Faulkner’s *Light in August*, also does not fit neatly into the established system of positions and rules in segregated Mississippi. Joe, who can sometimes pass for white but can also be condemned by others as “nigger,” is both black and white, and so he is not fully accepted by either group. In fact, he never has the words to accurately describe his racial identity; all he knows is that no matter where he goes, he does not belong.

Underscoring this lack of belonging is the boundary between human and animal, which is linked to the boundary between whiteness and blackness, and is just as vulnerable. The segregated South’s dependence on racial binaries leaves no room for a mixed-race figure to exist. His ability to live among people of both groups, and to pass from one group to the other while constantly searching for, but never finding, community traumatizes himself and others who encounter him. He is repeatedly vilified and cast out until he is finally lynched and castrated at the end of the novel. Joe’s abjection is compounded throughout the text through scenes that feature vomit or blood—both of which the body expels to protect itself—and through scenes that demonstrate Joe’s horror when he encounters the maternal space to which he cannot return.

As a child, Joe denies the blackness within him as much as he can in order to survive. However, once Joe is “outed” as “nigger,” his comfortable, whole identity is forever disrupted. As he grows up and becomes an adult, whenever Joe is reminded of his blackness, or reminded of the “animal” within him, he abjects this Otherness in attempts to protect his “own and clean self.” In these moments, which he experiences as a child in

real time and/or as an adult through a combination of real time and memory, Joe reacts in horror, anxiety, and disgust to his own abject identity, an identity that is viewed as an impossible blending of races in the culture in which he lives. Compounding this traumatic reaction to himself, Joe also responds in the same way to physical signifiers of the abject, like vomit, blood, or the feminine body.

Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber reads *Light in August*'s nonlinear, repetitive structure as a manifestation of Lacan's theory that to repress "a sense of lack gives rise to desire, which can drive subjects to repeat outmoded or even dangerous behavior" (71). She argues that Joe Christmas, who consistently feels excluded or anxious and lacks a sense of belonging to one culture or another, often acts repetitively and without control in attempts to feel a sense of control over his lot in life (73, 77). Kristeva argues that the abject person's desire to have a clear, unambiguous identity is, and will always be, denied. As such, the child suffers psychologically, questioning his or her identity in terms of "*Where* am I?" instead of "*Who* am I?" (8). Though Schreiber does not mention Kristeva specifically, she identifies numerous instances of this sort of questioning or wandering in Joe Christmas's behavior.

This sort of semi-conscious understanding of one's own abjection figures prominently into the pivotal scene in *Light in August* when Joe sneaks into the dietician's closet to eat her pink toothpaste, a scene that establishes the initial blurring of the white/black and human/animal divisions that recur throughout the text. In this scene, five-year-old Joe squats in the closet and squeezes coil after coil of pink toothpaste onto his finger, eating it until he becomes physically ill and is subsequently discovered. As he squirts the toothpaste onto his finger and smears it into his mouth, Joe struggles with the

human and animal instincts that are competing simultaneously in his mind and will determine how much toothpaste he should eat. Even as a young child, Joe can think rationally about how much toothpaste he can and should eat. From inside the closet, he thinks:

By ordinary he would have taken a single mouthful and then replaced the tube and left the room. Even at five, he knew that he must not take more than that. Perhaps it was the animal warning him that more would make him sick; perhaps the human being warning him that if he took more than that, she would miss it. This was the first time he had taken more. By now, hiding and waiting, he had taken a good deal more. (121-22)

Here, Joe struggles with the two competing parts of his identity, which tell him simultaneously to indulge his desire, but to avoid eating too much for fear of getting sick and of being caught and punished. By taking “a good deal more” toothpaste than he ever has before, Joe blurs the line between human and animal, challenging his belonging to either one of these conditions. By becoming neither human nor animal, he paradoxically becomes both. Kristeva suggests that “the abject confronts us . . . with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*” (12) and that to react to those states in horror is the primitive instinct to remove ourselves from “the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder” (13). To confront his animal instincts for the first time, in this moment, in which he listens to the dietician have sex but does not understand what it means, is particularly fitting then, and sets into motion the first association of sex, murder, and animals, a connection that often recurs later in Joe’s life.

Imagery of abject sweat in the scene echoes other images of the porous body. Sweat makes emotion visible; when Joe realizes how much toothpaste he has eaten, his anxiety over this behavior manifests itself as the realization that he has “been sweating

for some time, that for some time now he had been doing nothing else but sweating” (122). The sweat itself is abject because it does not respect the inside/outside boundary of the skin, but it functions here merely as a signifier for Joe’s abject identity; he only sweats because he consumes the toothpaste like an animal while simultaneously experiencing a very human fear of being shamed and punished.

In a similar way, the toothpaste itself is abject. Though it is pleasant-tasting and sweet, it is meant to be outside the body, but is forced in increasing quantities to go inside; this causes it to become disgusting and repulsive. The toothpaste is also associated with anal imagery and feces; it comes out in coils as Joe squats privately in a closed space. Suddenly, as Joe consumes the toothpaste with seemingly less and less control as he listens to the dietician and the doctor have sex, the toothpaste is personified. As Joe’s behavior twists and blurs the boundary between human and animal, the toothpaste becomes like a caged animal in itself. It “[tries] to get back out, into the air where it was cool” (122). Like Tom Riddle’s basilisk slithering through the intestines of the school’s plumbing to murder its victims, this other feces-like object also comes to life to threaten Joe.

Disassociating as he grows more and more nauseous, Joe has a semi-conscious and animalistic instinct is to eat more toothpaste, “which his stomach did not want,” but he is quickly repulsed by his behavior. In this moment, Joe is “turned in upon himself, watching himself sweating. . . . Motionless now, utterly contemplative, he seemed to stoop above himself like a chemist in his laboratory, waiting.” As he prepares to vomit, Joe “[listens] to his insides, waiting with astonished fatalism for what was about to happen to him. Then it happened” (122). Joe vomits, but even the act of vomiting is not

depicted as something that Joe *does*, but as something that happens to him. Joe's agency as a subject is already diminished. Kristeva anticipates a moment like this when she claims that the abject is "a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops so that 'I' does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence" (9). Here, Joe's ego and alter ego exist side by side—split instead of whole—and the repulsive gift of Joe's vomit from his "animal" alter ego renders Joe himself disgusting, but in assigning him the quality of being disgusting, it also keeps him from losing his identity altogether.

The closet scene functions as Joe's transition from the chora—the chaotic but blissful state of total union with the mother, in which the child is an object of the mother—to a state of watchful agency as a subject in his own right. Prior to vomiting, Joe views his relationship to the dietician as one close to that of a mother and child. As he enters her closet to get the toothpaste, Joe thinks:

The dietician was nothing to him yet, save a mechanical adjunct to eating, food, the diningroom, the ceremony of eating at the wooden forms, coming now and then into his vision without impacting at all except as something of pleasing association and pleasing in herself to look at—young, a little fullbodied, smooth, pink-and-white, making his mind think of the diningroom, making his mind think of something sweet and sticky to eat, and also pinkcolored and surreptitious. (120)

His impression of the dietician is like an infant's recognition of his mother. She is pleasant but nameless aside from her function in relation to his needs, mostly associated with food and nourishment. Her closet is similar to a womb, as it is a quiet, feminine space where Joe comes alone to feel safe and get nourishment. It is in this "delicate" and "soft" (120) space that Joe consumes the dietician's toothpaste—which stands in for the dietician herself—until it makes him physically ill. These feelings of nausea, which Joe experiences while eating the toothpaste and listening to the dietician have sex outside the



closet door, are signs that Joe is experiencing the pre-mirror stage that Kristeva says is associated most closely with abjection. Although the child does not yet have his own identity, he has begun to separate from his mother. Consuming the dietician's sweet, pink toothpaste while listening to her have sex, and then vomiting, suggest that Joe is expelling the dietician herself.

Kristeva argues that "food loathing" (2) is the most common form of abjection because it is the manifestation of our desire to both approach the mother and to separate from her. Our instincts to gag or vomit are in fact our instincts to protect ourselves from that food and from "the mother and father who proffer it" (3). Kristeva's description of what it means to vomit mirrors Joe's act of vomiting and the circumstances in which he does so. She writes that to vomit is to make a statement:

"I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "Me," who am only in their [the parents'] desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself out*, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that *they* see that "I" am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. (3)

When Joe vomits, he says to himself "with complete and passive surrender: 'Well, here I am'" (122). The act of vomiting pushes Joe out of the pre-mirror stage and more firmly into the linguistic stage, which is required for entry into the symbolic order. His declaration of "Well, here I am" is not only his first spoken words in the novel, but is also an acknowledgment of his own identity—an identity that is separate from that of the dietician and that is equated with the vomit. The sound of his vomiting is also what gets Joe caught; he is literally pulled out of the closet, of the womb-like safe space, and made

to understand that he has his own body that is not the dietician's, and that his body is racially different than hers.

The feces-like toothpaste and vomit become representations of Joe; they are all both inside and outside, and by all accounts, out of control. Moreover, the entire episode happens in the closet, which functions in queer discourses as a space of secrets and shame. His ejection from the closet is certainly Joe's transition into the symbolic order, but it is a transition that is marked by shame. It is the first of many instances in which others view Joe as a terrifying figure. Though the dietician views Joe as abject, it is for different reasons than those for which Joe views himself as abject. She too is repulsed by Joe's vomit, but she also believes that he was only in the closet because he was watching her have sex. She views him as abject because he is both innocent child and pervert, calling him a "little rat" and a "nigger bastard" in her "thin, furious voice" (122).

Like Tom Riddle, Joe is also without parents, but is rejected by the substitute parents in the orphanage where he is brought up. As a very young child, prior to this encounter with the dietician, Joe associates with a young girl named Alice, whom he "liked . . . enough to let her mother him a little," but when Alice leaves, Joe's relationships with women change. Alice was the only one who "was not and never would be his enemy" (136). The dietician is unlike Alice and much more like Tom Riddle's matron, Mrs. Cole. The dietician is just as eager to expel the threatening Joe from her womb-like closet, and from the orphanage in general, as Mrs. Cole is to send Tom off with Dumbledore. For the dietician to call Joe "nigger" as she pulls him from her closet, is for her to tell Joe "you are not like me." His expulsion from the dietician's closet is his first full moment of race consciousness. Had Joe been white or black, but not both,

perhaps this “birth moment” would not have been so distressing, but because he thinks the dietician is like him, and she very clearly separates herself from him with the slur “nigger,” this is a traumatic moment for Joe.

Moreover, when the dietician cannot be confident that Joe will not reveal her tryst with the doctor, she projects her fear onto Joe’s biracial identity. While she never gave the matter much thought before, after the toothpaste incident, she thinks to herself that she “had not thought of it before, but she believed that she had, had known it all the while, because it seemed so right: he would not only be removed; he would be punished for having given her terror and worry” (129). Though the other children have always called Joe “nigger” without him fully understanding its meaning, it is not until this moment that the adults view Joe as a threat. The dietician’s belief that Joe hid in her closet to take voyeuristic pleasure in her sexual encounter speaks to a general white paranoia about black male sexuality at the time, a paranoia that will later contribute to Joe’s death. While the dietician acknowledges that it will be “bad for the child to have to go to the nigger home, after this, after growing up with white people,” she qualifies the trauma and excuses herself by saying, “It’s not his fault what he is. But it’s not our fault either” (135). Her “terror and worry” that her sexual impropriety may be brought to light mirrors the terror and worry that people feel when their social order depends on a very clear delineation between black and white.

Before this incident, Joe understands very little of his differences from others. As a young child, Joe realizes that people like the janitor watch him constantly, but he does not assign any sort of value to the situation. Faulkner writes:

If the child had been older he would perhaps have thought *He hates me and fears me. So much so that he cannot let me out of his sight* With more vocabulary but

no more age he might have thought *This is why I am different from the others: because he is watching me all the time.* (138)

While Tom Riddle understands his difference from the other children and understands that he has “special” abilities that the others do not have, Joe, who is younger and thus unconscious of his difference, is in a position of powerlessness. Tom’s exit from his orphanage is hopeful; he believes that he is finally transitioning into a space in which he will belong. Joe, however, is simply cast out, and passed on to the first person who will take him.

It is only after his removal from the orphanage that Joe understands—though he cannot deal with—his composite identity as both black and white. As he grows up, this identity negatively affects his relationships with the feminine body, which he consistently views as repulsive and terrifying. These feelings of disgust are instinctual and serve to protect Joe from a return to the shameful, threatening maternal space from which he was violently ejected and dragged through his own vomit as a five-year-old.

As Joe becomes an adult, his sexual experiences with women traumatize him, reminding him of either his mixed identity, or of the maternal space. When Joe is fourteen, he and some other boys lure a black woman into a shed so they can take turns having sex with her. When Joe’s turn comes, he is “overcome” and recalls the feelings he experienced in the dietician’s closet:

There was something in him trying to get out, like when he used to think of toothpaste. But he could not move at once, standing there, smelling the woman smelling the negro all at once; enclosed by the womanshenegro and the haste, driven, having to wait until she spoke: a guiding sound that was no particular word and completely unaware. (156)

This sexual encounter in the darkened shed recalls Joe’s childhood experience as voyeur when the dietician and doctor have sex. The imagery here calls to mind the boundaries

that Joe's identity subverts: the animal and the perverse conflated with the negro. Encountering the negro woman in this voided space recalls the feelings that Joe experienced as a child: those of nausea and the desire to expel that which threatens. Faulkner takes away Joe's agency in this moment. He does not move; he only knows that he was moving "because his foot touched her." He doesn't kick her; his foot "touch[es] her again because he kicked her" (156). He realizes only that "he could not have told them" why he behaved this way; this desire to protect himself remains an unconscious one.

Later, Joe is disgusted by menstruation, or the idea that women (and their male sexual partners) are "doomed to be at stated and inescapable intervals victims of periodical filth" (185). Kristeva argues that menstrual blood is even more threatening than "excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.)" because menstrual blood, unlike excrement which threatens from the outside, "stands for the danger issuing from within the identity" (Kristeva 71). In this way, encounters with menstruation mirror the threat from inside Joe's very being: the threat of a composite identity. After learning about menstruation from another boy, Joe reacts by killing a sheep on his way home. He submerges his hands in the "warm blood of the dying beast," exerting his power over it, and then "[gets] over it" (185). Joe internalizes this knowledge, and by not dwelling on it, "he found that he could live with it, side by side with it. It was as if he said, illogical and desperately calm *All right. It is so, then. But not to me. Not in my life and my love*" (186). To claim power over the sheep and over its blood is to try to claim power over his identity. He acknowledges the threat of the blood,

but tries to repress it, telling himself that although it exists, he will categorize it as “not me.”

As Joe grows up, he realizes that the reality of the menstruating female cannot be repressed. When Joe hopes to have sex with the waitress but cannot because she is menstruating, the horror of this knowledge comes back to him. At first, he does not understand that she is trying to tell him that she is menstruating, but once he does, he is “outraged” (189). He leaves her and tries to move “further yet from home.” In the unregulated, non-domestic space of the woods, Joe confronts abject nature, within and without:

[He] seemed to see a diminishing row of suavely shaped urns in moonlight, blanched. And not one was perfect. Each one was cracked and from each crack there issued something liquid, deathcolored, and foul. He touched a tree, leaning his propped arms against it, seeing the ranked and moonlit urns. He vomited. (189)

Joe’s first reaction, when confronted with the feminine, is to try to protect himself by moving away from the woman herself, and from the domestic space. The urns represent the imperfection of the female body, and the “deathcolored, and foul” liquid leaking from the urns represent menstrual blood. Looking at the urns, Joe vomits in disgust. The menstrual blood here of course reminds Joe of the trauma of the maternal body, but it also underscores his own trauma as a biracial individual, an identity that he does not have the means to acknowledge, articulate, or understand. Like the mysterious menstruating female, Joe’s identity is also mysterious and beyond comprehension.

After this initial traumatic encounter with the female body, Joe once again represses his knowledge of menstruation and his disgust with the female body, and instead tries to anticipate others’ reactions to his own abject identity and use them to his

advantage. After sexual encounters with prostitutes, Joe reveals himself to be part black, and he counts on the women's horrified reactions to get him out of paying them.

Although identifying himself as Negro usually comes with few risks, after he outs himself to one of the prostitutes, she reacts in horror:

She was watching his face and she began to move backward slowly before him, staring at him, her face draining, her mouth open to scream. Then she did scream. . . . At first they thought that the woman was dead. He was sick after that. He did not know until then that there were white women who would take a man with black skin. He stayed sick for two years. (225)

This encounter triggers in Joe a major internal struggle. He travels north and lives with a black woman, trying now to embrace his identity as black rather than repress it. Joe's choice to be black is significant in that he is again trying to choose one race over the other; in this sense, it does not matter so much that he chooses the black race, but that he is trying to rid himself of the ambiguity of his identity in exchange for something whole. Still, Joe cannot choose one identity over the other; he is always both. While living among white people, Joe is constantly identified as a Negro, but while living with black people, Joe's whiteness is emphasized:

At night he would lie in bed beside her . . . feeling, even watching, his white chest arch deeper and deeper within his ribcage, trying to breathe into himself the dark odor, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes, which each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being. And all the while his nostrils at the odor which he was trying to make his own would whiten and tauten, his whole being writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial. He thought that it was loneliness which he was trying to escape and not himself. (225-26)

This passage exemplifies Joe's Otherness and the state of permanent exclusion that results from this Otherness. He is simultaneously black and white; his identity is

“impossible” (5) and he can experience full communion with no one, not even himself.

The inside/outside boundary is also subverted here; Joe both feels his chest rise and fall,

and watches it as if it is happening to someone else's body. He cannot escape his loneliness and the boundary between himself and another anymore than he can escape the boundaries established by his own body. Even the narrator recognizes Joe's separateness, focusing on Joe's repeated "trying" and failing to claim an identity.

It is this sense of exclusion, of being forced to acknowledge his Otherness that causes Joe to ultimately murder Joanna Burden. Entering into a relationship with this white carpetbagger, a repulsive figure in the South, "was [like falling] into a sewer" (256). Though he maintains some sense of separateness by working and living somewhat apart from Miss Burden, both of which allow him to deal with this relationship, he often thinks to himself "*This is not my life. I dont belong here*" (258). Part of what troubles Joe is that she does not fear the negro part of him, but instead finds having sex with him to be particularly erotic precisely because he is black (260).

Living with Joanna Burden forces Joe to grapple more closely with his perpetual state of confusion over his lack of identity. Though he was afraid, "he could not have said of what" (260), and he becomes even more troubled when he believes that she has become pregnant and may want to marry. It is only when she forces him to acknowledge his Negro identity, though, that he can actually acknowledge his disgust and horror and process it for what it is. Her suggestion that he go to "a nigger school" and "learn law in the office of a nigger lawyer" is tantamount to acknowledging once and for all that he is partially black. More than that, Joe seems to anticipate that he will not be accepted into black society. "Tell niggers that I'm a nigger too?" he asks Miss Burden. When she says that he must, so that he will not have to pay for school, he then projects his anxiety onto



Miss Burden herself. He realizes that he “never noticed” that she was “old” before this moment, and that she “[hasn’t] got any baby . . . [and] never had one” (277).

Joanna Burden attempts to kill Joe in more ways than one. She has a revolver with two bullets in it, but her suggestion that he try once again to immerse himself in black society also threatens Joe’s existence. Joe must destroy her and her house—this person and space that threaten him, that force him to confront his identity—in order to avoid being annihilated himself. This murder echoes Joe’s earlier killing of the goat in that they both come from a need to dominate the threat of the feminine. After murdering Joanna Burden, Joe struggles even more with the savage impulses that he cannot control. On the run, he is, at the same time, both human and animal. Recalling a time when he was eight years old and ate the food that Mrs. McEachern provided to him “with his hands . . . like a savage, like a dog” (155), Joe eats rotted fruit in the woods. He cannot psychologically loathe the food anymore, the way he did with the toothpaste in the dietician’s closet, even though the fruit he eats in the woods is “rotting and wormriddled” (334). He vacillates between being obsessed with eating and forcing himself to eat to survive. No matter what his motivation or his state of mind, however, Joe always expels the food “with resultant crises of bleeding flux” (334), which evokes his earlier horrors at both excrement and menstrual blood. His body continues to protect him from filth, from these savage impulses that compel him like an animal to consume food that is unfit for human beings.

Although Joe still struggles with his identity, his murder of Joanna Burden clarifies for the town’s white population why he is so threatening. While they know who he is—a nigger and now a murderer—he refuses to conform to the shame that those

identities demand. More than a usual menace, Joe infuriates and terrifies others because he does not fit into society's rules or set positions:

He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made folks so mad. For him to be a murderer and all dressed up and walking the town like he dared them to touch him, when he ought to have been skulking and hiding in the woods, muddy and dirty and running. It was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too. (350)

Joe murders because he is unable to reconcile a clear identity. What is more, this uncertainty is precisely why others want to cast him out, to kill him in the name of self-defense because he can pass for white. In the American South of the 1930s, a black man's refusal to act like a black man, or to know his place, is grounds for lynching. The threat to law and order—what if all black people refused to “know their places”?—must be contained.

In her discussion of passing, Siobhan Somerville cites common beliefs in the South that racial segregation was necessary in that it would allay fears about black sexual mobility, most specifically the fear of a white woman being unaware that they are near a black man (Somerville 35). To alleviate this threat to the “clean and proper” white culture, Joe's body must be destroyed. White supremacist Percy Grimm not only kills Joe, but also castrates him, equating “clean and proper” white culture with the pure feminine body. Standing over Joe's dying body, Grimm says, “Now you'll let white women alone, even in hell” (464). Grimm destroys Joe's body—permanently casting him out from white society—and, by castrating him, also returns him to the abject maternal space. As Joe dies, “his face, body, all seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, and from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath” (465). Joe's death releases black blood, releases part of what

traumatizes him and others from the inside out. District attorney Gavin Stevens, who recounts the story of Joe's capture and death in the novel, muses that Joe must have had competing impulses within him—the rational, civilized white blood and the savage, impulsive, violent black blood—both fighting for control over his body. It is Joe's black blood that Stevens says “failed him again, as it must have in crises all his life” (449).

The inability to eradicate the memory of Joe's body points to the inability to eradicate the threat of racial ambiguity. Joe dies and the black blood leaks out of him:

The man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatful, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant. Again from the town, deadened a little by the walls, the scream of the siren mounted toward its unbelievable crescendo, passing out of the realm of hearing. (465)

Schreiber argues that this death scene suggests that Joe “seek[s] punishment for his transgressions” because he is “[resigned] to his culture.” His problem, she says, is that “he accepts the voice of his community that tells him he has to be punished for ‘passing,’ living in a white world, sleeping with a white woman, and expressing his aggression by ultimately murdering her” (79). However, I believe, as I have already demonstrated, that Joe's problem is that he does not have a culture; as a mulatto, he can fully access neither white nor black society. Moreover, he does not even know how to what to call himself. His racial identity is mixed, but in a society that is so clearly delineated between two extremes, there is no middle group of people who are both black and white to which Joe can belong. Schreiber is certainly correct to say that Joe feels anxiety about “passing” as white and feels a sense of aggression that leads him to murder Joanna Burden. This anxiety and aggression, though, is not the result of “pure submission to the cultural

symbolic” white world. Though Joe certainly recognizes the white world as the better choice, his trauma comes from his inability to join the white world *and* his inability to join the black world. Joe cannot be “[resigned] to his culture” precisely because it is not *his* culture; he cannot “transgress” because he is perpetually in the middle, on neither one side nor the other.

Though everyone is freed from the abject Joe Christmas, they are still subject to the trauma of acknowledging the existence of Joe and others like him. Even in death, Joe remains abject because the memory of his racially ambiguous body is always present and “not fading” (464), therefore perpetuating the trauma of recognizing a vulnerable border. In Faulkner’s Mississippi, the racial boundary and the rules that come with it are the most critical of all to preserve order, but people like Joe point to the extreme tenuousness of this boundary and the ease with which it can be subverted. Even when the physical presence of the mulatto is eradicated, the knowledge that order is always just moments away from chaos terrifies those who depend on that order for position and security.

Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman argues that Faulkner constructs Joe Christmas as a symbol of the Southern white man’s identity crisis in the post-Reconstruction South, using Joe as the mulatto who “could evade or straddle the color line.” After the Civil War, the “state of white masculinity” (176) was threatened by the legal destruction of the “oppositional relation between black slaves and white master citizens” (180), triggering an “obsession with black manhood” in the minds of white males (176). If the South’s established social order had once been dependent on whites’ prerogative to view blacks as their legal property, then after the Civil War, this status quo could be protected only through the passage of racist laws. In this already unstable society, the mulatto functions

as a “living metaphor for the gruesome history” of race relations the South (176) and a “specter who haunts social order” (179).

Joe’s ability to pass for white is viewed as a threat to the stability of white society, and to the constructs of racial superiority upon which order depends. Passing implies that identity markers like race are malleable. Joe, who has light enough skin that can be perceived as white, can choose to some degree how he wants to be perceived by those around him. Elaine Ginsberg theorizes that the concept of passing can be applied to many different kinds of identity markers:

Passing is about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties. Passing is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing. Finally, passing is about specularity: the visible and invisible, the seen and the unseen. (2)

It is Joe’s ability to cross the boundary between black and white that inspires so much rage and fear in white society. It makes them “so mad” that Joe does not act like a nigger, that he does not feel an appropriate sense of shame or inferiority in that he is also a murderer. Instead of being assigned an identity by his blood status, Joe’s ability to create or adopt a white identity—even though he himself doesn’t feel white—is terrifying to white men. If all black men choose to adopt a white identity, or even simply reject the confines that society has placed on them because of their skin color, then what power will they leave for white men?

While the novel’s white characters fear that Joe will adopt a white identity, Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman argues that Joe’s black identity is not inherent either. She reads Joe as a character who “has little interiority and even less discernable motivation for doing what he does” (177). As I have demonstrated, when he needs or wants to, he can

pass for white, just as he can also inject himself into black culture. Though he always feels psychologically excluded, no matter with whom he surrounds himself, Joe can pass for white and also fall victim to “the violence generally reserved for black people—i.e., lynching and castration” (178). While Joe Christmas is, according to the “one drop of blood” laws of the time, legally black, Abdur-Raham seems to suggest that his identity would not prompt nearly as much “awe and rage . . . in white men” (181) if he actually was entirely black. Her argument suggests that these white men would feel safer if Joe’s identity could be determined one way or the other because then they could place him into one of the two groups that dictate social, political, and economic behavior.

The white male’s insecurity and terror over his unstable position in the post-Reconstruction South is resolved in *Light in August* by lynching and castrating Joe. Castrating the black male, in the novel and in Southern society of the time, allows white men to literally take the phallus back into their possession and to reclaim “the symbolic and sexual power they themselves had previously ascribed to black masculinity” (Abdur-Rahman 187). To castrate Joe is to reestablish white dominance; to lack the penis is to be less powerful—to be a woman, or to be a black male under slavery (188). Without slavery to enforce what white males viewed as the proper social order, lynching functions in the novel, and in the history of the segregated South, as the corrective. Percy Grimm, as the “white phallic authority” (189), is the restorer of safety; by destroying Joe Christmas’s racially ambiguous black-white body, Grimm maintains the racist binary that benefits him and other white males, eliminating the anxiety that bodies like Joe’s provoke.

As a child, Joe is told, “You are worse than [a nigger]. You don’t know what you are. And more than that, you wont never know. You’ll live and you’ll die and you wont never know” (384). It is precisely this not knowing—especially in Jim Crow Mississippi—that traumatizes Joe throughout his life. This taunt, though, is as much terrifying as it is protective for he who utters it. If Joe is a nigger, then everyone knows exactly who and what his position is. For Joe, and all those who encounter him, to not know and to never know threaten the stability, order, and cleanliness of a society that depends on separate white and black bathrooms to preserve a “clean and proper” state.

### 3. “I can’t help feeling that I’m not me”: *Flowers for Algernon*’s Charlie Gordon

Joe Christmas’s world depends on the order imposed by strict racial segregation to maintain a sense of security for society. Joe, as someone who passes from one race to another and back again, threatens the orderly system and thus threatens society as a whole. While race provides one axis of binary opposition, in Daniel Keyes’ *Flowers for Algernon*, the range of mental disability/intelligence provides another more complicated mode of understanding difference. The novel’s protagonist Charlie Gordon, who is severely mentally retarded and excluded from mainstream society, agrees to subject himself to controversial brain surgery that will, if successful, give him average intelligence. Eager to learn in the hope that he will feel a sense of community with others if he gets smarter, Charlie documents his rapid passing from mental disability to genius and back to disability again in the form of progress notes to the experiment’s scientists. The black/white boundary that orders society in *Light in August* is mirrored in the boundary between those who have normal intelligence and those whose intelligence falls above or below normal range in *Flowers for Algernon*. As a disabled child, Charlie was already marked as Other, and as he grows into an adult who should have agency but does not, he becomes abject. Moreover, after the experiment, Charlie quickly transitions to average intelligence and then to genius-level intelligence without ever casting out his mentally retarded identity; because he can pass from one identity to another, he neither feels a sense of belonging with anyone, nor is able to expel his former self.

Disability studies and theories of abjection go hand in hand. In her work on genetics and ethics, Karen O’Connell discusses the orderly genetic make-up of the human being, calling the strand of DNA “a body without abjection” because everything has its



clean and proper place (224). When something goes awry in the orderly genetic makeup of an individual, the disruption creates a physical or mental manifestation of difference. Although Charlie's specific mental disability is not formally diagnosed and may not be genetic, we can understand the way his disability is viewed through this framework. O'Connell says that genetic technology "[learns] how to control body boundaries . . . [and] inevitably shift[s] them" (225). O'Connell proposes the example of injecting fish DNA into a tomato, a scenario that most would find unnatural, to make the claim that the possibilities for manipulation and destabilization that genetic technology creates produce anxiety, fear, and disgust in many people. Although this technology is generations into the future from Charlie's time, we can use the manipulation and malleability of genetics to understand the experiment done on Charlie's brain. To produce a genius by changing something fundamental inside of Charlie, all in the name of trailblazing the scientific frontier, is unsettling to many people. Perhaps just as insidious is the idea that to *not* do the experiment that could "fix" Charlie would be to fail in a critical way.

As Charlie grows more and more intelligent, he remembers traumatic moments of shame from his childhood in which his parents fight over whether to "fix" him or accept him as he is. Though his disability marks him as different, to be an unquestionably disabled, dependent child is an uninterrupted identity. The disabled adult becomes abject; the adult should have the powers of agency, understanding, and language, but Charlie, though he is in an adult's body, is dependent on others and remains unable to understand the motivations and actions of others or to fully articulate his own feelings and retain control over his memories and body.

It is not until the experiment on Charlie's brain succeeds and he becomes a genius in a matter of weeks that others are made to feel unsettled, even shocked or sickened, by Charlie. Though he looks the same, it is clear that he has changed. More than that, as Charlie's intelligence grows, he begins to view himself as abject; he knows that the "old" Charlie is still inside him, still fighting to control his body, even though he now has one of the greatest intellects in the world. Charlie's new intelligence allows him to access memories and to be aware of his abject qualities, which were before invisible or part of his unconscious. In this state, Charlie's mentally retarded identity becomes wholly abject, but it is a part of him that he cannot cast out. Charlie's condition evokes that of Joe Christmas, who knows that his blackness is always inside of him, threatening him. Kristeva believes that this "abjection of self" is the most intense form of abjection that we can experience. She writes:

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it is none other than abject. (5)

While the genius Charlie tries to cast out his disabled former, yet ever-present, self, he finds that he cannot. In addition, when Charlie gains the power of recollection, he remembers moments in which he tries to abject his disability—to claim only one of two mutually exclusive identities, either normal or abnormal but not both—even as a child. In his past and his present, Charlie's instinctual reaction when confronted with his own abjection is to defecate. Each time this happens, the behavior is prompted by circumstances which force him to become conscious of his mental retardation.

As Charlie becomes more and more intelligent, he develops a framework that allows him to access and narrate repressed childhood memories. One of the first memories he is able to access is when he is six years old and his parents are fighting over how to deal his increasingly apparent mental retardation and inability to be “normal.” In this memory, the adult Charlie, who is becoming more conscious and intelligent, watches the child Charlie, who is struggling to control his bowels while his parents argue. Like Joe Christmas, who watches himself vomit in response to the anxiety he feels at getting caught eating the dietician’s toothpaste, Charlie watches himself lose control of his bowels. Both children cannot cope with their parents’ behavior; while Joe cannot understand what sex is, Charlie can neither solve his parents’ problems nor articulate his own needs. As his parents scream at each other, the most Charlie can do is “[reach] up for [his mother’s] hand and [sob] out: ‘Toi—toi’” as he begs for help to get to the toilet in time (75). Though both the adult and child Charlie realize what is about to happen, the child, the one who is actually in the situation, cannot verbalize it. His parents continue to argue about whether or not they should “[pretend] he’s normal” (73), and the adult Charlie, who views his childhood self as a separate being, “[has] the impulse to shout at [his parents]: ‘Look at him. There, down there! Look at Charlie. He has to go to the toilet!’” (74).

The adult Charlie “can almost feel . . . the stretching and knotting in his intestines” and watches his childhood self lose control and defecate in his pants, just like Joe feels the toothpaste inside him struggling to get out. Charlie’s narration here blurs the line between his adult and childhood selves. Of the resulting feces, he recalls:

It is soft and warm and he feels the confusion of relief and fear. It is his, but she will take it away from him as she always does. She will take it away and keep it

for herself. And she will spank him. She comes toward him, screaming that he is a bad boy, and Charlie runs to his father for help. (75)

In this event, Charlie's defecation is a reminder of the lack of control that he has over his own body and pants. In addition, because Charlie disassociates, remembering this incident as happening to someone like him but seemingly separate from him, Charlie views himself as abject. Though he is now a genius, ironically, it is only in this state that he can access traumatic childhood memories and articulate what it feels like to be the mentally retarded child that repulses his parents. Charlie's complex relationship with his mother indicates that he has not progressed to the mirror stage (when an independent identity that is separate from the mother's is formed), or to the linguistic stage that follows, but she has. He remains both dependent on his mother and unable to articulate or act on his needs, while she is eager to separate him from herself and force him to act independently. However, Charlie is unable to do this; his world is still a complicated amalgamation of various feelings, needs, and external stimuli. Though Charlie is trying to separate from his mother, his parents believe that, as a six-year-old, he has already done so. When it becomes apparent that this is not the case, his mother views him as "a bad boy" and punishes him for making a disgusting mess. Like Joe Christmas's vomit, Charlie's shit is abject in itself, but functions more importantly as a signifier of Charlie's inarticulateness and therefore abject identity.

Charlie's shit is a symbol of abjection by his mother. She loathes Charlie and tries to discipline him as much as she can in attempts to make him "normal" and less repulsive. The male figures in Charlie's life, however, are more accepting. Charlie recalls when his parents brought him to Dr. Guarino, who promises to raise his intelligence to normal levels. This memory is similar to the one I have previously examined; this time,

however, Charlie's parents are actively trying to do something to make him normal.

Though Dr. Guarino does not ridicule Charlie for his disability, the time he spends in his office reminds Charlie that he is considered "not normal." As he is strapped down on Dr. Guarino's table, he:

feels the wetness and the stickiness around his legs, and the odor tells him that his mother will punish him with the spanking and the corner for making in his pants. He could not control it. Whenever he feels trapped and panic sets in, he loses control and dirties himself. Choking . . . sick . . . nausea . . . and everything goes black. (139-40)

Charlie recalls the shame and fear he feels whenever he loses control and defecates in his pants. Dr. Guarino reassures him and leads him back to his parents in the waiting room. His mother reacts in horror when she sees Charlie's wet pants. Although Dr. Guarino encourages Charlie's parents not to punish him for this behavior because he wants to prevent Charlie from "connect[ing] punishment with coming here" (142), the problem is not that Charlie is forced to visit this office; it is that Charlie is consistently made to feel aware and ashamed of his difference. As a child, he sometimes forgets "how bad he is, how he makes his parents suffer" (142). These moments are reminders; he is not bad because he defecates, but because he is "not normal."

Charlie's mother dominates the males who try to advocate for, or at least accept, Charlie. During this visit, Dr. Guarino calls Charlie a "nice boy" (143) and, afterward, Charlie's father Matt says that although having a child like Charlie is a "cross," he will "bear it and love it" (143). This maternal language of bearing and loving a child is a sharp contrast to the tyrannical Rose, Charlie's mother, who screams at Charlie and views him with embarrassment, shame, and disgust (142) as if his inability to control himself is a reflection on her. As Charlie grows up, his mother's perception of him shifts from

viewing him as an embarrassment to viewing him as a threat, and she takes steps to have him removed from her home. Though Charlie always wants “to be the smart boy she wanted [him] to be, so that she would love [him]” (144), once Rose has another child, a normal little girl aptly named Norma, Charlie’s disability becomes much more pronounced and unbearable to his mother. She gives up trying to make him normal and instead, like Tom’s Mrs. Cole and Joe’s dietician, wants him to be removed from her presence. Charlie still has the mental capacity of a child, but he has the physical abilities and sexual drives of an adult. Though Charlie is unconscious of these desires, his mother views him as a threat and warns him, “If you ever touch a girl, I’ll put you away in a cage, like an animal, for the rest of your life. Do you hear me?” (112) Charlie’s desire to obey, to make his mother happy and to keep the peace, creates a fear of the feminine that persists into his adult life.

Referring to himself in the third person, Charlie remembers taking pleasure in trying on his family’s clothes out of the hamper, including Norma’s dresses. He recalls that his childhood self “would like to try them on and make believe he is Norma, but once when he did that his mother spanked him for it” (85). This memory queers Charlie; he expresses a desire to cross-dress as feminine. However, Charlie does not want to be Norma because she is a girl. He wants to be Norma because of how everyone else, especially their parents, views her. To be Norma is to be loved, accepted, and included. Moreover, to be Norma is to be someone who would view Charlie as fearful or loathsome, not to be the one who is fearful or loathsome himself. Unfortunately, Charlie does not understand why he desires to be like his sister, and makes his situation worse by getting caught dressing as a girl.

While he looks through the clothes, he finds a pair of Norma's underwear with menstrual blood on it. He is immediately fearful, believing that Norma has "done wrong" (85) and that he too might be punished. As Charlie grows up, he begins to associate the fear that his mother will punish him with a fear of castration, since Rose threatens him with a knife and wants to use that knife to protect herself and Norma, when Charlie is a child and later, when Rose is senile, when Charlie is an adult. This fear of castration is something Charlie continually tries to repress, even as an adult. To be castrated, the way Joe Christmas has been at the end of *Light in August*, is to be returned to the threatening feminine or maternal space, symbolized so directly by Charlie's very threatening mother. While he is still disabled, the adult Charlie fears the feminine body. When a woman flashes him after he delivers baked goods to her house, he is afraid, and the expression of his fear, his incoherent "whining," scares the woman who "[gives] him a quarter to forget what happened" (111). He tells this woman that "he [tries] to be good . . . and not look at women, because his mother used to beat him whenever that happened in his pants" (112).

Charlie's abject identity becomes more complicated as he becomes more conscious. His intelligence expands rapidly and he becomes an intellectual genius in a matter of weeks. However, the nature of the experiment is such that Charlie's surgery does not remove the damaged parts of his brain, but rather covers them over or represses them. He becomes a genius, then, while still retaining the identity of the mentally retarded man he once was. His identity becomes unclear; he is both simultaneously, and so he is neither.

The first reaction of horror that comes from this composite identity is when Charlie gets promoted for coming up with an idea to increase profits at the bakery where

he works. Instead of being proud of him, Charlie's coworkers avoid him. At first, he thinks that "it will take time for them to get used to the changes in [him]," but he then realizes that "everyone seems frightened of [him]" (59). On the surface, these coworkers see the same Charlie whom they always knew, but when Charlie demonstrates that he is more intelligent than he once was by suggesting new ways of operating the bakery and speaking about things he never had the capacity to talk about before, they cannot understand how Charlie can look the same as he always was but be so different on the inside.

Charlie's continued fears of women and of sexual arousal also speak to the still-present and repressed disabled Charlie. After a date with Alice, his former teacher, Charlie dreams of a girl who frightens him when she touches him. He "feel[s] a strange bubbling and throbbing inside [him] that makes [him] warm" and then "see[s] a bloody knife in her hands" (83). He cannot have sex with Alice, who, as his teacher, functions as a much more caring mother, figure primarily because of the fear that if he does, he will be returned to the abject maternal space. He "still hear[s]" his mother's voice in his head, warning him to never touch a girl (112).

Charlie also becomes much more conscious of the idea that there is another Charlie inside him: the retard that exists simultaneously with and threatens the dominance of the genius. He tells Alice that "I can't help feeling that I'm not me. I've usurped his place and locked him out. . . . You can't put up a new building on a site until you destroy the old one and the old Charlie can't be destroyed. He exists now. In me and around me. He's been coming between us all along" (201-02).



It is this understanding of his own dual, yet singular, nature that continuously threatens him. While others believe that there are “two Charlie Gordons,” Charlie himself understands that there is only one Charlie, and that he does not switch between genius and idiot but that both exist simultaneously. Dr. Strauss, one of the experimenters, argues that Charlie merely experiences moments in which he “[perceives] himself as he was before the experiment—as a separate and distinct individual still functioning in his consciousness—as if the old Charlie were struggling for control of the body.” Charlie corrects him; the “other” Charlie is “not struggling for control” but is “just waiting” (248). To take over would be to assert one clean and proper identity over the other; to have both present, even if one lies somewhat dormant, is to be unclean, or abject.

Almost immediately, as the conversation escalates, Charlie disassociates again. Within the text, he becomes both Charlies, conscious of both of their feelings and needs. The genius Charlie watches his mentally retarded counterpart “twitching and writhing” (250) with the need to go to the bathroom, the same protective behavior that he performed even as a child. Even though the genius is portrayed as only watching, the situation is happening to his body, not to a separate entity. He defecates in the bathroom, and when he looks up, he sees:

Charlie watching me from the mirror behind the washbasin. I don't know how I knew it was Charlie and not me. Something about the dull questioning look in his face. His eyes, wide and frightened, as if at one word from me he would turn and run deep into the dimension of the mirrored world. But he didn't run. He just stared back at me, mouth open, jaw hanging loosely. “Hello,” I said, “so you've finally come face to face with me.” (251)

Even though Charlie literally looks in a mirror here, this gaze is not the equivalent of Charlie asserting his own identity, the way Tom Riddle's mirror moment in the Chamber of Secrets is. Although Charlie has certainly literally recognized his own image in the

mirror here, it is the experiment as a whole, and learning how to write about it, that ultimately functions as Charlie's mirror moment. This literal moment in front of the mirror is complicated by the fact that he recognizes his reflection as simultaneously "me" and "not me." The Charlie in the mirror is not a representation of his former self, but a part of himself that is repressed, but with him at all times. Whereas a child would see the ego-ideal, or the whole self, in the mirror, Charlie's vision is complicated by seeing the disabled self, which used to be whole but which the experiment rendered separate or partial.

Kristeva anticipates the strange joy that someone feels when he or she "violently and painfully" encounters the abject in him or herself when "the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other" (9). This encounter with the other Charlie represents the abject threat of losing one's agency, of giving up the language that we use to structure our world. Charlie encounters his pre-linguistic self, whom he views as a threat. Speaking directly to this other Charlie, he defiantly declares that he is "not going to give up [his] intelligence without a struggle" and that the other Charlie must "stay inside [his] unconscious where [he] belong[s]" (252). Though each part of Charlie's identity might likely be terrified by the other, neither run away from what they see. Instead, they seem to depend on each other for existence or understanding; thus, as Kristeva says, "one . . . understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims—if not its submissive and willing ones" (9).

Moreover, the matter becomes even more complicated as Charlie becomes increasingly aware of how the disabled are perceived. Charlie tries to provide the mouse Algernon with the care and concern that he himself does not receive from the scientists,

going so far as to steal him from the scientists and keep him at his own apartment. When Algernon's health begins to fail and his intelligence begins to decline, Charlie takes Algernon's deterioration as a sign that he needs to prepare for a future in which his own intelligence dissipates and he reverts to his original mental state. He visits the Warren State Home, a facility that cares for mentally retarded adults, and he is horrified by what he sees.

During this visit, Charlie quickly understands that disabled people supposed to be kept separate from normal society, but the place along the border, in this case at Warren State Home, does not desire them either. The head psychiatrist gives Charlie a personal tour, in which he casually tells Charlie that when patients escape from the facility, the staff does not make any extraordinary efforts to get them back. If Warren does not find the patients with relative ease, or they are not returned to the facility by members of the community, then everyone assumes "they've made some satisfactory adjustment on the outside." The more common scenario, however, is that "most of them come back when they find there's nothing for them out there." The psychologist casually tells Charlie, "The world doesn't want them and they soon know it" (223). Of course, at this point, this undesirability is not new to Charlie, which puts him in a somewhat different from the other charges at Warren, who may be just learning this. He has already come to understand how unwanted he was by his mother, and has recognized that his weak father, who showed willingness to "bear . . . and love" Charlie, could not overcome Charlie's strong mother. Knowing the pain and the sense of homelessness that will come with exclusion, Charlie has every reason to fear a return to this mental state of disability.

The grim conditions inside Warren promote a sense of regimented discipline and isolation from the outside world, which causes some of the boys to try to seek out one another for comfort. When they cuddle one another, the head nurse, Thelma, explains away this queer behavior by saying that it happens only because “no one else . . . has time for them [and] sometimes they know enough to seek human contact and affection from each other” (226). Most boys, however, sit together but alone, without purpose or understanding. At several points, Charlie identifies with these boys and wonders what it will be like to live here.

The staff at the Warren State Home and Training School clearly categorizes all of the patients as Other and further subcategorize them according to how close they are to being “normal.” The psychologist, Mr. Winslow, identifies those who escape from Warren as “high-moron types,” as opposed to the “brain-damaged” (223). Thelma, the nurse, calls all of the patients “children” no matter how old they are, and further categorizes them as “tidy or untidy” (229). The patients are physically and socially separated from the rest of society, viewed as defective and beyond help by the state or the family members who place them there, and by the staff who care for them. Imperfections and abnormalities are viewed as shameful; even Thelma’s large birthmark on her face is hidden as much as possible (224).

Calling all of the patients, regardless of age, “children” seems to make caring for them more tolerable for the staff. By keeping some of the most profoundly disabled patients in cribs and bottle-feeding them, and by calling all of them children or boys, the staff can view themselves as mothers who are fulfilling a natural function for children who need them. The emphasis on need, coupled with categorizing all patients as children,

makes the staff more comfortable. As Thelma says, “with babies you don’t mind so much, but when they get to be adults and still can’t care for themselves, it can be a nasty mess” (225). After all, she says, “how many people do you know who are prepared to take a grown man into his arms and let him nurse with the bottle? And take the chance of having the patient urinate or defecate all over him?” (230).

Thelma is different from the female caretakers in the other novels. Mrs. Cole, the matron of Tom’s orphanage, Joe’s dietician, and Charlie’s mother are all eager to separate themselves from their children, whom they recognize as “not me.” Thelma, on the other hand, relishes the idea that these disabled men are her “children.” She has no desire to expel them from her womb, the Warren State Home, and considers the fact that they will need her care for their entire lives to be “rewarding” (230). She understands that these patients need “all [she] can give” (230), and she is willing to give herself entirely to them the way that these other mothers, and the way that Charlie’s biological mother, is not willing to do. Perhaps Thelma is different from the other women, and is so eager to keep her children, because, with a large birthmark on her face, she too is considered disabled and repulsive.

Lennard J. Davis, in his foundational study *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, argues that the disabled/abled binary necessitates the same “ideology of containment and a politics of power and fear” (4) as other boundaries like black/white and straight/gay. The trouble, he says, is that “normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person” (24), much the same as the “problem” of blackness is understood only through the “norm” of whiteness. According to Davis, we aspire to be normal, or else we purposely aspire not to be—to be a part of the vast

majority or to make a conscious political statement to join the minority. To be identified as the minority by others because of a physical marker like skin color, pedigree, or physical or mental ability is to be victimized by the binary, to be considered below average, to be marked as separate.

It is this tendency to view the disabled person as something Other, something not normal, that leads Charlie to be a participant in the experiment in the first place. The scientists, Dr. Strauss and Dr. Nemur, treat Charlie relatively the same as they treat Algernon the mouse, who has also been intellectually modified. Instead of being viewed as a human being, Charlie is often considered to be the object of their experiment, requiring no more consideration than Algernon and no more concern over the experiment's long-term consequences. They are valued only for their contributions to science, for what can be done to them. Charlie argues with Dr. Nemur:

The problem, dear professor, is that you wanted someone who could be made intelligent but still be kept in a cage and displayed when necessary to reap the honors you seek. The hitch is that I'm a person. . . . [You've done] everything but treat me as a human being. You've boasted time and again that I was nothing before the experiment, and I know why. Because if I was nothing, then you were responsible for creating me. . . . What you did for me . . . doesn't give you the right to treat me as an experimental animal. I'm an individual now, and so was Charlie before he ever walked into that lab. (247)

Although the scientists follow the clean and proper, orderly procedures for a scientific experiment by subjecting Charlie to all the requisite tests, conducting rigorous observations, and forcing him to document his progress in "notes," the experiment and the process itself become disorderly and threatening when the scientists fail to account for Charlie's human motivations and needs. Charlie soon realizes that the scientists do not care about him as a person, and the scientists also fail when they expect Charlie to be polite and grateful to them. "Since when is a guinea pig supposed to be grateful?" he

asks. The scientists have certainly succeeded in achieving the experiment's original objective to make Charlie smarter. However, they have unintentionally created a person who cannot be categorized and thus they have created something that defies the order that science demands.

Moreover, the problem with Charlie is not that he is disabled; it is that his body and his mind point out the malleability we all share. If Charlie can transform from mentally retarded to genius and back to mentally retarded in a matter of weeks, so can we all. Ruth Hubbard argues that this sense of vulnerability is why we isolate the disabled “so [we] will not have to see them” (93). Her posed scenario—that most would find it morally reprehensible to allow abortions to prevent children with darker skin from being born, but that many do not feel the same outrage when parents wish to abort a disabled child—applies to Charlie's situation. Norma feels no qualm in giving her consent for Charlie to be experimented upon. As a child, Charlie is subjected to his mother Rose's repeated attempts to make Charlie “normal.” His disability is something undesirable, something to be fixed at all costs. Charlie himself has internalized this lesson; before the experiment takes place, he repeatedly expresses his desire to be “smart,” and thus included and accepted. In one of his progress notes, he writes, “If your smart you can have lots of friends to talk to and you never get lonley by yourself all the time” (15).

Hubbard's exploration of using abortion to avoid “burdening society” with disabled children and to avoid bearing children whose lives are “not worth living” (102) is exactly the nature of the experiments performed on Charlie and Algernon. No one objects to “fixing” Charlie, whom almost everyone views as a burden, and as someone whose life is not worth living as it is now. Even Alice, who functions as Charlie's

advocate and teacher, is the one who recommends him for the experiment in the first place. Only one nurse expresses any sort of concern about augmenting Charlie's intelligence, but that nurse is quickly removed from Charlie's team of caretakers.

While the novel certainly argues for the better treatment of the disabled and certainly classifies them as some kind of Other, the disabled are at least firmly placed on one side of the able/disabled boundary. Though Charlie certainly suffers as a mentally retarded adult, and is victimized in the novel because of his disability, he has a singular, whole identity. It is the experimented-upon Charlie who does not have a space at all, who is paradoxically both and also neither, and thus troubles those who encounter him, starting with his first nurse, who tells Charlie that the scientists are "tampering with things they got no rite to tampir with" (16). To be disabled is to be abject. To be disabled, and then not disabled, and then disabled again is to be doubly abject. No matter what, Charlie never belongs. He is never included.

Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues that the disabled person feels threatening to the able-bodied person because it forces the able-bodied person to acknowledge that "anyone can become disabled at any time" (14). While she is referring to the physical disabilities that come from an accident or trauma, or to the general wearing-down that comes with old age, her words shed new light on the horror of Charlie's identity. Thomson's discussion revolves mostly around physical disabilities; she generally classifies mental disabilities as congenital and permanent. However, though Charlie's disability is mental, the identity that society has assigned to him because of this disability is not fixed. His identity can be manipulated by science, and he can develop intellectual capabilities, even though they are ultimately not permanent.



*Flowers for Algernon* is the only novel that I have examined in which the character attempts to resolve his own abjection in a way other than death. As the experiment begins to fail, Charlie has a vision of his ambiguous identity becoming whole again. In a state of intellectual decline, he writes:

As I lie here waiting, the moment passes during which I *am* myself *in* myself, and again I lose all feeling of body or sensation. Charlie is drawing me down into myself. I stare inward in the center of my unseeing eye at the red spot that transforms itself into a multipetaled flower—the shimmering, swirling, luminescent flower that lies deep in the core of my unconscious. I am shrinking. Not in the sense of the atoms of my body becoming closer and more dense, but a fusion—as the atoms of my-*self* merge into microcosm. There will be great heat and unbearable light—the hell within hell—but I don’t look at the light, only at the flower, *unmultiplying*, *undividing* itself back from many toward one. (283)

The multipetaled flower is Charlie’s identity, and as the experiment fails, Charlie’s “divisible, foldable” (Kristeva 8) identity folds back and “undivides” itself. The petaled flower once again becomes a compact bud, and Charlie’s unconscious resolves itself as “the atoms of [his] body [become] closer and more dense.” Charlie’s *self* tries to become whole again as the genius part of Charlie dissipates. Charlie identifies this multipetaled flower, a feminine image that commonly signifies the vagina, as existing within his masculine body. This queers Charlie even further and, rendering his identity even more unidentifiable, calls into question Charlie’s ability to truly “undivide” himself.

As the experiment fails and Charlie reverts to his original state, however, it turns out that Charlie’s whole and undisturbed identity cannot be restored. While he forgets the knowledge he once gained, and goes back to work at the bakery, Charlie still remembers who he became and parts of what he learned about human nature. He returns to the bakery to clean toilets like he did before the experiment, except this time, he anticipates that he may be made fun of, whereas before, he never realized that his coworkers

ridiculed him. He tells himself in increasingly misspelled progress notes, “Charlie if they make fun of you dont get sore because you remember their not so smart like you once thot they were.” Upon his return to the bakery, sure enough, a coworker, Meyer Klaus, makes fun of him, saying “hey Charlie I hear you’re a very smart fella—a real quiz kid. Say something inteligent.” Charlie is conscious of the taunt this time. He writes, “I felt bad because I could tell by the way he said it he was making fun of me” (307).

His reaction to the taunting, to the reminder that he has another part of his identity inside himself that has been lost or cannot be accessed, is the same as it was when he was a genius and remembered his retarded self. As soon as Klaus grabs his arm and begins twisting it, Charlie writes, “I got so afraid I felt like I was gonna cry but I didnt and then I had to go to the bathroom something awful. My stomach was all twisting inside like I was gonna bust open if I didnt go right away” (308). As soon as he is reminded that he was once a genius, he reacts with the same anxiety and horror—and instinct to defecate—that he used to. The only difference here is that his reaction to his own abjection—to his feces—is different. As a child, the result of Charlie’s abjection is the fear of punishment, whereas now, Charlie feels “ashamed” and immediately wants to “clean [himself] and change [his] cloths” (308). His first instinct is not to protect his feces as belonging to him, the way he did when he was a child and he worried that his mother would take it away from him, but to get rid of it as an abject reminder of the position he once cast away and to which he has now been forced to return. Though this episode occurs at the end of the novel, and it remains unclear as to whether or not Charlie can retain his memories of his genius self, it seems that Charlie will react with this kind of horror whenever he is reminded that he used to be, as Klaus says, “a very smart fella” (307).

**Conclusion: “It’s not his fault what he is. But it’s not our fault either.”**

After deciding to “out” Joe Christmas as a mulatto and expel him from the orphanage, the dietician justifies her behavior to herself. “It’s not his fault what he is,” she says, “But it’s not our fault either” (135). However, this abdication of responsibility for the way the abject child views himself, is not accurate. What happens to Joe is caused by cultural conditioning that teaches the dietician, and everyone else in Joe’s world, to value whiteness over blackness. White people remain dominant, and black people, though victimized, also find community with each other. It is someone like Joe, who is both and therefore can be neither, who remains stuck in no man’s land and wreaks havoc on the system that depends on each person being white *or* black.

This desire to avoid chaos can be traced back, according to Michel Foucault, to the fear of the plague. To restore order, it was necessary to implement quarantines and other regulatory measures to control the behavior of the individual in the name of communal health and safety. Instead of simply casting out the diseased to make a pure community, the community is regulated from within to prevent infection in the first place (198-99). Foucault maps this analogy onto all abnormal people when he says that “the existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal brings into play the disciplinary mechanisms to which the fear of the plague gave rise” (200). Encompassing this idea is Foucault’s theory of the panopticon, in which knowledge of the potentiality if not the actuality of constant surveillance causes individuals within the community to regulate their own behavior to avoid punishment. The power of the state to enforce its policies and values becomes so pervasive that the state does not need an individual ruler, or even a group of rulers, to

perpetuate its control (201-202). Instead, the people work and obey on their own, reaffirming their own utility and docility as they maintain the status quo (138). Once the dominant ideas of acceptability are established, those in control need not spend large sums of money, wage a public relations campaign, or manage fall out in order to maintain these ideas. When attitudes of acceptability are internalized, as Foucault says, “it does not matter who exercises power” because anyone “can operate the machine” (202).

The past century has been marked by prolonged periods of chaos and fear that the world as we know it will end. Consider the cataclysmic World War I; the atomic blasts over Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the “duck and cover” of the Cold War; and the Twin Towers collapsing in New York City on September 11, 2001. Consider also the social, political, economic, and scientific advances of *Brown vs. Board of Education*; the Civil Rights Act; the gay, women’s, and worker’s rights movements; and the cloning of Dolly the sheep. With all of these events, tragic or triumphant, came feelings of terror, anxiety, or disgust. With all of these changes, at least part of the population struggled with seemingly imminent annihilation of their values, culture, or even their very lives. Who among them had not been made to feel at one point or another that their survival—and the desire to avoid the slippery slope—depended on their willingness to operate the machine?

Against these movements of extreme change, our instinct is to fight to preserve the world’s established or intrinsic systems of order—especially categories of race, class, and gender—that we have internalized as good or safe. We protect the boundaries of our clean and proper societies to avoid chaos and confusion. (Incidentally, we have grown so fearful of chaos that we are fighting a War on Terror, exchanging chaos in American

cities for remote chaos in the deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan.) To preserve order, we perpetuate laws and institutions that maintain “the disciplined mass” (Foucault 168) and suppress or exclude those who may seek to challenge the established order. The Jim Crow laws that subjugate Joe Christmas and trigger his lynching, the mental hospital that seeks to separate Charlie and the scientists who desire to “fix” him, the school which teaches Tom Riddle that magic is might—and even the mass media, which creates the image of the “normal” boy in Dyson Kilodavis’s world—are all examples of these institutions.

Unfortunately, in maintaining systems of discipline and order, we create the conditions for harmful feelings of inferiority in the Other. According to Judith Butler, the subject is both produced from and dependent on established power systems, and the subject’s attachment to these systems is a “psychic effect . . . of the workings of power” (Wilkie-Stibbs 325-26). What’s more, according to Butler, because dependence on others is a natural condition of the child, the child is then the quintessential subordinate subject (326) who is more likely to obey and embody the status quo. Moreover, the child is likely to be subjected to institutions—schools, orphanages, etc.—who have “clearly defined goals of training children and adolescents” (Trites 22). We see this theory in practice when Tom, Joe, and Charlie all learn what society values and try to shape themselves to fit those ideals. After spending time in one or more of these institutionalized spaces, Tom embraces magic, Joe seeks whiteness, and Charlie risks his life to become intelligent. Unfortunately, as I have already explored, their composite identities make total conformity—or discipline, as Foucault would call it—impossible. It follows, then, that

not only do we create conditions for the Other to feel inferior, but we also create trauma for those who are not included in culture, but cannot join a community of Others either.

Judith Butler, in *Gender Theory*, cites Iris Young's reimagining of the abject to explain various types of discrimination. According to Young, "the repudiation of bodies for their sex, sexuality, and/or color is an 'expulsion' followed by a 'repulsion' that founds and consolidates culturally hegemonic identities along sex/race/sexuality axes of differentiation" (133). For the purpose of including Charlie Gordon in this explanation of racism, sexism, and homophobia, we can also add "ability" to the axes she identifies. We cast these Others outside of the border of the state, or of accepted social circles, in the name of self protection, just as we would expel filth from the borders of our bodies. "In effect," Butler writes, "this is the mode by which Others become shit" (134).

Butler acknowledges, however, that neither the body nor the state can achieve this "impossible impermeability" (134), and that some bodies who are feared will always infiltrate the society that is composed of bodies that are desired. This disruption of the state's "clean and proper" body reifies the discrimination against the Other. Each time the Other tries to assimilate into the state, "the national ego expels the undesirable face from its ranks, conceived and connoted as racially and ethnically defiling or polluting, to achieve free and uninhibited supremacy" (Wilkie-Stibbs 324). Thus, the state reaffirms the Other's status as different or unclean, as the "stranger that inhabits us" (Kristeva, qtd. in Wilkie-Stibbs 325). This person, according to society, is "not us" and must be cast out. At the same time, this person's status as "not us" is also a product of our own discipline by a power greater than ours. We subscribe, even unconsciously, to the expectations of identity politics, whether we "self-select the characteristics associated with a group or

whether those characteristics are imposed on [us] by the perception of others” (Trites 47). In this sense, identity politics are certainly limiting, but if we conform to the expectations or characteristics of a certain group, we can find some sense of belonging. What happens, then, when we are confronted by a child whom our group casts out, and whom the other group casts out as well? If we as individuals do not create the conditions that produce the abject child, we at least submit to them and thus perpetuate them through our own values and desire for community.

Our cultural attitudes tell the child what to value and what to cast aside, and it is these same attitudes that trigger us to shun the child when he or she cannot or will not obey. How else would these children come to understand their identities only as slurs—Mudblood, nigger, retard? With this in mind, the refusal, or inability, to reevaluate these standards functions to create the very beings that are perceived as threatening, or disgusting. How, then, do we move forward?

Kristeva herself, in an essay called “Women’s Time,” tries to anticipate potential ways to break out of the identities that society has created for us and to solve problems associated with exclusion. Though her argument here is specific to the future of the feminist movement and to women who desire to transcend or subvert the roles that the patriarchy has assigned to them, her overall recommendation is helpful in dealing with all types of difference. If we demand that belonging to culture necessitates the use of language, then we must “demystify the identity of the symbolic bond itself, to demystify, therefore, the community of language as a universal and unifying tool” (34).

In order for women (and, indeed, all disenfranchised people) to advance, Kristeva says that we must come to understand identity itself as a socially constructed concept.

This, she argues, will result in the “demassification of the problematic of difference” and render the “‘fight to the death’ between rival groups” as unnecessary (34). Though she acknowledges that these changes would challenge “social equilibrium” because social equilibrium is currently “made up . . . of the counterbalancing of aggressive and murderous forces massed in social, national, religious, and political groups” (34), she says that this risk is worth it when the alternative is to continue with the current system of violence and exclusion. In this new system, language needs to be seen as “a universal and unifying tool, one which totalizes and equalizes” (35). The new system needs to accept “the multiplicity of every person’s possible identifications” and “the relativity of his/her symbolic as well as biological existence” (35).

Lennard Davis, in acknowledging that race, gender, sexual, and ethnic categories have become more fluid but that disability has yet to evolve as much, argues for a new state of dismodernism. Similar to Kristeva, who wishes to make difference less fearful, Davis argues that in a state of dismodernism, we would acknowledge that “difference is what we all have in common” (239), and that we must all think of ourselves as impaired (241). Why, Davis asks, would we maintain a “category of being just because oppressive people in the past created it so they could exploit a segment of the population”? (235) Up until now, we have concerned ourselves with extending the rights of the “normal” white, heterosexual, able-bodied man to all segments of the population and creating “protected classes” of people in attempts to secure these rights for the marginalized. Davis argues that this is the wrong way of going about expanding access, freedom, and acceptance. Instead of creating “protected classes,” we must expand the idea of protection to the whole population by forming a society that codifies access for everyone. It is only then



that we will be able to recognize that “we are all nonstandard” and that attempts to fracture identities or to categorize are simply distractions “from the unity of new ways of regarding humans and their bodies to further social justice and freedom.” In this way, we overcome abjection and “the binary of docility and power” (241) because we have stopped viewing the body as the marker of identity.

Certainly, Davis’s state of dismodernism is idealistic and perhaps non-instinctual. However, the world in which we live insists that we at least work towards this ideal. The world is becoming increasingly global due in part to the free market and the expanse of the internet. Communities are becoming less homogenous. The societies that I have examined here—those in which evil is ubiquitous and living right next door, in which interracial children exist, in which “normal” parents produce “abnormal” children and vice versa—refuse to accept and assimilate that which is viewed as abject. The overreliance on bound community (and bodies) and the paralyzing fear of difference create trauma. Because difference is so prevalent, the community or individual who seeks protection and order through abjection actually heightens their own feelings of vulnerability. For a society to hold fast to systems and rules that, as the world evolves, become outdated and cruel is for a society to condemn itself to perpetual feelings of danger, unease, and disgust. It is a tall order, and perhaps an impossible one, to expose ourselves to difference, to overcome our disgust or anxiety, and to live alongside the Other without forcing him or her to conform or be exiled. But the desire for security and stability, which can never be fulfilled if we continue to fear that which is “not me,” demands that we try.

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