Abjection in Contemporary Australian Young Adult Fiction

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Not to have a sense of self is death
(Holderlin in Levine 1992, p.266).

Whilst the term 'abjection' is familiar, its application as a literary function in the theory of subjectivity in contemporary young adult fiction is relatively new (see, for example, McPherson, 1999). However, an understanding of abjection is crucial to perceiving both the implied and explicit limitations placed upon the human construction of agency and the effects it has on the construction of teenage characters within story discourses. This paper investigates manifestations of abjection in contemporary Australian young adult fiction, drawing on the works of Julia Kristeva and Robyn McCallum, together with a discussion of the humanist construction of subjectivity and agency.

Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror* (1982), has provided us with the most original and comprehensive study on abjection. She defines abjection as an effect produced by things or beings that appear to be aberrant,

> *... thus [it is] not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.* (Kristeva 1982, p.4)

From this definition one can already distinguish an inherent problem in the application of this term. It is ambiguous. Many people, things and events can be perceived as abject but will not necessarily be universally construed as such. The problem lies in the subjective interpretation of 'borders, positions, rules'. Humans do not draw a common line to define what rests inside (and thus acceptable) and what lies outside (and thus unacceptable) 'identity, system, order'. Therefore, what one person may perceive as abject another may tolerate. Hence the discernment of abjection is not only ambiguous from the nature of its definition but its identification will depend upon the ideological construction of the focalizer who is engaged in the act of interpretation. Despite the ambiguity in the perception and application of abjection it is nonetheless commonly defined in a negative manner because of its ability to disturb the ordered environment (order being imbued with a natural superiority over that which is anarchic). Hence the individual who is proclaimed abject is at once professed 'contemptible [and] despicable' (Macquarie Dictionary) because in the act of being labelled they are in the same moment the embodiment of anarchism and as such represent a potential subversion of the privileged conception of order. Therefore abjection is a phenomenon intimately associated with the repulsive, despicable and loathsome aspects of human nature and society. Manifestations of the phenomenon are repellent because by nature of their origins they are repugnant to the focalizer who perceives them as abject. It is not my purpose here to challenge the validity of the negative assumption of abjection – suffice to understand the origins of its pessimism.

Kristeva's essay on abjection is, according to the analysis offered above, aptly titled *Powers of Horror*. Abjection, as a literary function, horrifies for two crucial reasons. It is an effect that once identified in the individual will be used as just premise to exclude her/him from mainstream society. As a result of the ensuing process of exclusion the subject will be disengaged from a dialogic relationship with others. This severe outcome is created through the patterning of events, characters, narrative discourse and focalization – and all function in unity to illustrate the negative effect of abjection on subjective development. The extent of impact will depend upon the purpose of the discourse. Therefore, in the first instance, abjection horrifies for it effects the debasement of the subject by removing their agency, thus causing them to become inoperative within their society. And secondly, as the Latin term *abjectus* suggests, it is that part of the self, or the self in its entirety, that is thrown away. It is through this fear of being cast out that abjection engenders such terror. Furthermore, as Elizabeth Grosz writes, 'what must be expelled ... can never be fully obliterated but hovers at the border of the subject's identity, threatening apparent unity and stability with disruption and possible dissolution' (1990, p.87). Abjection, an elusive phantom that is always already there, is a constant threat to subjective development. Successful identity formation will depend upon the subject's ability to suppress symptoms of abjection in themselves.

Inextricably intertwined in this process is the quest for selfhood. As McCallum has pointed out,

Conceptions of subjectivity are intrinsic to narratives of personal growth or maturation, to stories about relationships between the self and others, and to explorations of relationships between individuals and the world, society or the past – that is, subjectivity is intrinsic to the major concerns of adolescent fiction. (1999, p.3)

The construction of the self in novels for adolescent readers tends to be based on the humanist model that advocates a belief in an essential self that requires the exercise of one's own agency. Hence many examples of young adult fiction are either explicitly or implicitly based on the *quest* motif. The discourse is driven by the young characters' desire to search out their reward – an obligatory, stable and permanent sense of identity. The adolescent who is engaged in the quest must be provided with opportunities to assert their agency and thus forge a sense of 'I am' and 'I am becoming' in a dialogic relation to others.

Nearly all examples of contemporary adolescent fiction exhibit abjection to a certain degree because nearly all texts in this genre of writing are concerned with issues of maturation. The patterning of maturation invariably invokes some issues of conflict because of the necessity to assert agency in the formulation of identity. The assertion of agency usually involves, in young adult fiction, the denunciation of socially constructed boundaries. It is in this act of resistance that abjection takes effect. Again, I stress that abjection is the result, or effect, of some form of catalyst and hence its manifestation is open to subjective interpretation. What however is more tangible in the analysis of abjection – once perceived in the individual and whilst admittedly a subjective judgement – is that the phenomenon functions as a destructive force in subject development because its appearance facilitates the refutation of intersubjective relationships indispensable to the process of identity formation. *Night Train* (Judith Clarke, 1998), *Peeling the Onion* (Wendy Orr, 1996) and *Touching Earth Lightly* (Margo Lanagan 1996) are all novels concerned with the formation of adolescent identity and focalize abjection as

the primary theme in the development of character subjectivity. All three novels map the development of abjection and the characters become a function within this narrative pattern.

In order to explore the origins and nature of the phenomenon of abjection the novels adhere to a formulaic schema. The process begins with a fragmented identity leading the character to withdraw from society. The greater the self-perplexity the more isolated the character becomes and the more likely it is the community will exclude her/him. Society's exclusion compels the subject to question their authenticity and, finding their selfhood successfully deconstructed they are subjected to a fading away and in some cases an eventual erasure of identity. According to this schema the novel usually suggests the possibility of, or allows, redemption for these lost subjects. *Night Train, Peeling the Onion* and *Touching Earth Lightly* clearly illustrate the subjective social construction of abjection and the configuration of the phenomenon by and through the story discourse.

To exemplify the degenerative effects of abjection, the discourse of *Night Train* (Clarke 1996) traces the development of clinical depression in Luke's character. Luke is trapped and rendered powerless, he is in fact at the mercy of a discourse that is successfully denying him the agency to act. The situation is further exacerbated by the placement of his death within the novel's construction. *Night Train* opens with Luke's death. What viable alternatives can transpire for Luke when his fate has already been settled? Luke, placed in a position of servitude to his own future, seems to have no way forward. The narrative has ensnared and isolated him from potentiality. He becomes increasingly isolated, lonely and abject. The narrative continues to alienate him from his ability to act and he strays further from developing a sense of 'I am' and 'I am becoming'. Luke is placed in a helpless situation with no opportunity to engage in the assertion of his own agency.

Like Luke, Anna is struggling to define her identity. Her character maps the inception and evolution of abjection within the narrative discourse of *Peeling the Onion* (Orr 1996). A car accident has left Anna's body broken and in

chronic pain. She is 'permanently impaired' (p.114) and her conception of self is altered. However, it is not the disabilities that keep Anna's identity fractured but her inability to acknowledge her shifting subjectivity. She represses all physical and cognitive deficits so that she can maintain the pre-accident image of herself and her future. Over half way through the novel Anna is still unable to admit her identity has taken a new route. Whilst she concedes in her poem that her body is fractured 'like a babushka' doll, she is determined to find 'a perfect gift inside' (p.93). Nonetheless the extent of bodily damage debars Anna's definition of perfection and instead of developing a new schema to facilitate the process of identity reformation Anna's subjective development stagnates. This state of inertia leads Anna to desist from asserting her agency. Hence she is no longer forging a sense of 'I am' and 'I am becoming' in a dialogic relation to others.

Central to the humanist construction of subjectivity is the ability of the individual to engage in intersubjective relationships. In order for individuals to assert their subjectivity they require the Other as signifier. Lacan wrote of the other as being, '...the locus in which is situated the chain of the signifier that governs whatever may be made present of the subject' (1978, p.203). Identity will be signified by recognizing one's difference to others and by Others pointing out that difference. Hence, the human being has a basic and urgent need to engage in meaningful relationships with others and society at large so that a sense of self can be formulated. Humanist theory contends that humans learn who they are and how they fit into the world by interacting with other humans. As a natural progression from this assertion, humans who are excluded from the company of others will be unable to form an individual identity. The result of this failing is bleak: insanity or cessation. Thus the young adult novel that is modelled on the quest motif requires the adolescent, as part of the maturation process, to come to a realization that without the signifying Other they face unequivocal death.

The second phase in the patterning of abjection of the self involves the subject's withdrawal from society and later, society's rejection of the alienated individual. Anna, having lost the ability to assert her own agency, withdraws from contact with signifying others. '[She's] asleep when

Hayden phones, tell[s] Jenny [she] can't talk, tell[s] Luke [she's] going straight to study when he drives [her] home from school' (p.110). Anna, finding comfort in her alienation, is consumed by solipsism. She is no longer capable of constructing a sense of herself as an agent.

The Other is necessary to signify to the subject his or her individuality. The individual in a state of solipsism is vulnerable because s/he is unable to distinguish between his/her own self and the otherness of the world and of other people. Humanist theory maintains that we all begin life at this stage and a facet of child development is the recognition of Others and the self. Individuals form a sense of identity by recognising that other people are different from 'me'. As a child grows into adulthood it is making the transition out of solipsism and this maturation process forms the basis of most examples of young adult fiction. McCallum has identified two main forms of solipsism pertinent to the current discussion:

> ... a person may be unable to perceive an other as another self, and hence denies that other a subject position independent of his/her self ... or a person may be unable to perceive her/his own selfhood as independent of the world, and to construct a sense of her/his self as an agent. (1999, p.7)

Both manifestations of solipsism figure as key aspects in young adult novels. The first form of solipsism is particularly evident in adult characters that function as inhibitors (often in complete ignorance) to the protagonist's burgeoning sense of identity. These adult characters are constructed in such a way as to deny the protagonist an independent subject position. The second form of solipsism occurs as a result of the first. Because the protagonist has been debarred from the maturation process they find themselves unable to assert agency and thus incapable of establishing an independent sense of self.

Luke, like Anna, has also withdrawn from society in an attempt to piece together his fragmented identity. It is in this withdrawal that his actions appear aberrant to those around him and as such he is something other. Those who are other are feared because they represent non-conformity. Non-conformity threatens the ordered environment that in turn threatens, at a basic level,

survival. Therefore, Luke whilst withdrawing from the community is simultaneously excluded because society perceives him as a disruption to their environment. Unable to assert his individual agency, Luke must comply with the imposed exclusion.

To Luke's girlfriend Caroline, Luke has knowingly and wilfully retreated from intersubjective intimacy and is therefore at fault. However the discourse suggests that Luke's withdrawal is not his failure but Caroline's.

> *'Caro-'*
> *'Yes?' she whispered.*
> *He took that deep breath again. 'See, what happens is, when I sit down to work, I-'*
> *'What?' The word jumped from her mouth. It was too loud or something; he clammed up again.*
> (Clarke 1998, p.76)

The point at which Luke retreats coincides with the moment the word jumped from Caroline's mouth. The language is prejudiced against Caroline who was not patient enough to hear Luke out. The discourse constructs Luke as a disempowered individual and allows Caroline the power to define who Luke is by leaving unchallenged her perception that Luke has withdrawn and is aberrant. The novel is both denying Luke agency and illustrating a larger social problem: society's failure to sufficiently deal with adolescents whom 'they' perceive as deviant in behaviour. In this way, abjection is serving a thematic function within the text by highlighting the often inappropriate construction of normalcy.

Janey, in *Touching Earth Lightly*, must also endure an enforced isolation. Her destiny is a function of the plot to illustrate the effect of abjection on subjective development. Janey is excluded as a result of her sexual behaviour. Some days she simply couldn't wait until evening and soon,

> *news is muttered around the school, and eventually someone, [says] ... 'It's disgusting. She's worse than a prostitute; she doesn't even get paid' ... Sophie goes back to her friends and they all bitch together... Janey slips into the first period after lunch a little bit late. Girl's faces ice over; ... Janey's lips are very red and her eyes and skin are as bright as dew with sunlight on it* (Lanagan 1996, p.123)

It is the blatancy of Janey's actions that the girls find abhorrent and they scorn her. However, she is not condemned but is favoured by the discourse. The text privileges Janey's sexuality over that of the other girls, who are bitchy and cold. In comparison Janey is bright and warm. She is accepted and rejoiced in by the text. Hence the abjection that is linked to Janey's corporeality is clearly presented as a socially produced and subjective construction and something in which Janey will only engage in when she sees that other people interpret her existence as abject. The important point being conveyed is that abjection is a condition produced by society to deal with inassimilable behaviours. Janey experiences abjection because she has challenged the social construction of acceptable sexual behaviour.

Society repels both Janey and Luke because they are manifestations of a socially constructed abjection. As such they represent a threat to stability and unity. Lanagan positions a range of characters across a social spectrum to generate a consensus regarding the imminent danger of the abject self. At school 'teachers had warned Chloe that Janey was "not a good influence"' (p.43). At home Chloe's Mum was worried that Chloe might endanger herself through association. Even her brother Nick is wary of Janey. It is believed that Janey is dangerous because she has transgressed societal norms. Transition denotes an uncertain subject position. Mary Douglas, in her studies on society and culture, suggests that

> *Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state or the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others.* (1976, p.96)

A person exhibiting an ambiguous subject position is not only in a state of evolution, which is threatening to them, but interestingly they pose a threat to others. The reason for this is based on the necessity to assert agency in the process of identity formation. The expression of agency in young adult fiction usually assumes the form of resistance, or even defiance, of the social boundaries for acceptable behaviour – the precincts are typically established by the adult speaking world. The objective of the discourse is to find some way to resolve this point of

conflict between the two realms. For some the variance is irreconcilable and in this case the character will be debarred, by factors outside of their control, from engaging in intersubjective relationships. This exclusion from society subverts subjective development. Consequently, such characters become so unsure of themselves and their place in the world that they become a part of the exclusion process by concurring with the enforced segregation and as a result perceive themselves as responsible for their estrangement from friends and family. In that state subjects believe they alone can make sense of their world and the more they stray the more abject they become. They are searching for an answer that will only be found by acknowledging the other and by engaging in intersubjective relationships. However, their isolation has become so overwhelming they are incapable of perceiving the solution. This all-consuming isolation is dangerous because it facilitates manifestations of abjection, and society, identifying these individuals as abject and uninterested in the catalyst for this abjection, excludes what they perceive as aberrant and abhorrent. The subject's life now is 'not based on *desire*, as desire is always for objects', it is based on exclusion (Kristeva 1982, p.6).

Such is the fear of contagion from Luke, in *Night Train*, that even his mother considers him a danger. This is clearly illustrated when Luke offers to take his little sister Naomi, to the model village at Roselands.

> *'No, no, you can't,' his mother said in a quick*
> *panicky voice, and the way she sprang in front of*
> *Naomi then, protectively, reminded Luke of a*
> *scene from a nature film, a lioness guarding her*
> *cub from danger.*
> *From him, he realised.*
> (Clarke 1998, p.153).

This example serves to highlight the fear of the abject's proximity. Luke's assimilated abjection scares the non-abject. Margaret recognizes that Luke's journey is leading him to insanity or even death and instinctively seeks to protect her young daughter from that end. Clarke uses this condemnation to effect a break in Luke's mental state and to exemplify the mother's failure to recognize the origins of Luke's abject self. Again the discourse favours

the abject adolescent – Luke feels the 'pain of it' (p.153) and is left with an 'empty place ... filled with shock' (p.154). The failure of the mother is emphasized by the crimson face and avoiding eyes that betray her embarrassment and discomfort. The recognition of the abject's danger to others provides further justification for their exclusion. It also serves to increase the rapidity of the abject's decline and ultimate erasure of identity.

The excluded subject is in a life threatening position because s/he exists outside the community. Society is undeniably essential for the continuance of human life. Whether one accepts the Aristoteleian model that asserts human society is an ethical enterprise, or the instrumental individualism of Hobbes who regards society as intrinsically unwelcome, survival depending upon 'the desperate devices of panic-stricken egoists who can find no other way to avoid mutual destruction' (Campbell 1981, p.70), humans must have Others to maintain the perpetuation of life. For this reason the isolationist is rejected because their status denotes a threat to the concept of community. The abject transgressor threatens social unity and a dislocated society threatens cessation. Therefore, the repellent becomes repelled. Society excludes the abject for fear of the ambiguous status that positions them as potential dissenters. Abjection, as a disruption to identity, system and order, endangers ongoing survival and thus any member who is 'contaminated' must be quarantined and ultimately (if uncured) eliminated. Therefore, abjection is more than a disturbing phenomenon; it is an occurrence maintaining that which is acceptable. Since society functions at best in cohesion and its individuals, as constituent facets, also desire unity in their identity, abjection poses a constant threat to social organization. For this reason those who transgress and who are subsequently ab-jected are an example to all to conform to the regulations imposed.

Exclusion from society forces subjects to question their authenticity. Anna perceives that "'I am' is ... a lie" she looks inside and sees 'nothing at the centre except a swirling void ... The real Anna doesn't exist' (Orr 1996, p.120). Her selfhood has been successfully deconstructed, she is abject, and with no discernable future she contemplates death. However her mother removes the

instrument of suicide and forces Anna to do something else with her life – she is compelled to return to the social world. The discourse provides an opportunity for Anna to reassert her agency by surrounding her with characters that believe in her ability to do so. In this way the discourse of *Peeling the Onion* is very different from that of *Night Train* and *Touching Earth Lightly*. Whilst Anna defines her own subject position as abject, her immediate community does not. This discrepancy is directly linked to the catalyst and nature of her abjection. Her family and friends do not blame her for her abject state – it was the fault of a negligent driver. The displacement of blame allows the surrounding characters to distinguish between the person 'Anna' and the psychological state of 'abjection'. Hence, Anna is a victim of the phenomenon for reasons outside of her control, whereas Luke and Janey are the victims of a society unable to discern the origins of their abjection and hence they are concurrently person and abject.

Both *Touching Earth Lightly* and *Night Train* are constructed in such a way as to exclude the real possibility of redemption, primarily because Luke and Janey's deaths are a *fait accompli* and also (and no less importantly) because they are both without agency. However, the narrative plot does attempt to convince the reader that Luke and Janey can be saved. There is one significant scene in each of the novels that would easily beguile the reader into believing that redemption was a plausible possibility. In *Night Train* Luke's chance meeting with Ms. Rosa Brennan sets the scene. Rosa wants to help Luke and she tells him that,

> '... things will change for you, I promise. I know it's difficult now, at school, but it won't always be like that. When you leave, when you start university – '
> His face closed like a fist.
> Oh God, she'd spoiled it.
> (Clarke 1998, p.112)

Rosa's failure inverts the convention of young adult fiction that presupposes a saviour exists for all. The chapter concludes with Rosa turning into her gate and feeling 'a chilling sense of something missed, slipped sadly from her hand' (p.112). She has been given full

responsibility for this failed rescue attempt. The novel is once again illustrating society's inability to deal with individuals who do not conform to the majority's construction of 'normal'. Society believes it is normal for HSC students to pursue study at university (or TAFE) and do not make provisions within this schema for those who deviate from the model.

Janey is different from Luke in so far as she admits Others into her life. However, like Luke, she is failed by a society unable to come to terms with her non-conformity. Even her best friend Chloe, tries to modify Janey's behaviour asking her to fit in and 'fall in *love*, like everyone else' (Lanagan 1996, p.53). Chloe is signifying to Janey her 'otherness' and pressing Janey to function inside of society's boundaries. She is explicating the need for conformity so that Janey may be included rather than excluded. However, Janey is unable to accept help and therefore appears to deny help but the denial is not a failure to see ways out but an abject acceptance that she is without the agency to act independently. Society has removed or negated opportunities for her to actively assert resolutions. The identity of the subject engulfed by abjection will ultimately be erased.

The most disturbing disruption to identity is death. It annihilates all that constitutes the self and as such is the most dangerous manifestation of abjection in subjective development. Kristeva writes that,

> ... the corpse, [is] the most sickening of wastes, [because it] is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled ... The corpse ... is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject.
> (Kristeva 1982, pp.3-4).

Death is just as rigorously expelled from society as any other act of transgression. It is a reminder to all that membership to life is ephemeral, that order may be disturbed. Georges Bataille asserts the corpse is repellent to those who look on for, 'the corpse is the image of his ... [or her]... own destiny' (1990, p.44). Those who are left to live are compelled to shun that which threatens to destroy and thus the abject transgressor, the dead, is abjected from society.

In death the uniqueness of Janey as a human being is erased. Death imposes non-identity and for this reason it is feared and shunned. Isaac implores Chloe to leave the scene of Janey's death. He feels that he 'can't leave' her there for she'll 'go mad'. What's more he is 'afraid' for her (Lanagan 1996, p.105). The fear does not stem from the recency of the crime and the potential return of the attacker(s) for the blood was dry and the body cold. Janey had obviously lain there for a day at least. The danger Isaac fears is Chloe's maddening realisation of her own fate. The corpse is repellent to those who look on. For this reason we are compelled to reject that which threatens to destroy and the dead (the ultimate form of abjection), as a reminder of non-identity, are spurned and disposed of.

Luke's identity, like Janey's, is also lost in death. This is foregrounded in the text and is made an issue by the discourse. The amount of space allocated in the discourse to describe the ambiguity of Luke's identity in death is significant. Molly looked at Luke in the coffin and thought,

> *She'd have passed this boy in the street for a total stranger.*
>
> *They'd done something to his face. It was like they'd taken all his features, his nose and mouth and brows and eyes and arranged them in a different pattern, so you couldn't know him.* (Clarke 1998, p.5)

Molly found Luke in death disturbing and frightening for he was not Luke at all – just some stranger. Naomi 'didn't recognise him [either]' (p.7). In young adult fiction, death is invoked to illustrate the complete failure of the subject to assert their agency and thus fulfil the desire to create an identity – the sense of 'I am' and 'I am becoming' in a dialectic relationship with others. It is also used to demonstrate the failure of the adult speaking world and/ or society to recognize the cause of what they identified as abject in the subject.

This study has attempted to place usable parameters on the definition and application of abjection in the analysis of three examples of Australian young adult fiction. Abjection is not a catalyst for aversion but a manifestation of the repellent. It is an ambiguous phenomenon because no one deed will be universally construed as abhorrent. However, the term can be unanimously defined in terms of its effect. Abjection, once identified in the individual, impedes subjective development because it effects the debasement of ones agency. The abject individual withdraws from contact with signifying others. Isolation inhibits a dialogic relationship with others and the abject beings are no longer able to perceive themselves as occupying independent subject positions and consequently they slip into solipsism. In this state of solipsism the abject signals danger to others because the effect of abjection denotes an uncertain subject position. Others feel threatened by this ambiguous state of transition and often enforce the debasement of the subject by denying them their agency, thus causing them to become inoperative within their society. From here two distinct pathways transpire: the abject may confer with the dominant ideology and as a result be consumed by a vacuous void to the point where their own identity is effaced; or, the abject may resist the effects of abjection by reasserting their own agency and by engaging in a dialogic relationship with others.

The novels discussed in this paper bear out the theoretical framework. They demonstrate very clearly the ubiquitous concern in adolescent fiction with issues of maturation and subjectivity and certainly give credence to McCallum's conjecture that 'subjectivity is intrinsic to the major concerns of adolescent fiction' (1999, p.3). Abjection is a phenomenon useful for the identification of the complications that arise in subjective development and as such provides a clearer insight into the configuration of Australian young adult fiction

END NOTES

1. I am more interested in her process of definition as opposed to her application of abjection to studies in psychology.

2. 'the repellent becomes repelled', an idea originating from Kristeva (1982, p.13) who writes of the separation that must take place between child and mother. She asserts that to allow the child to become *me* '...the mother will turn into an abject. Repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. Ab-jecting'.

3. This term first appears in Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection*.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Kim Wilson is an English/History teacher at Pymble Ladies' College in Sydney. In 2000 she completed a Master of Arts in Children's Literature (by coursework and dissertation) at Macquarie University under the supervision of Professor John Stephens. The thesis submitted for this degree was entitled *Manifestations of Abjection in Young Adult Fiction*. This article has been adapted from a number of chapters from that dissertation.