

Characteristics of Abjection in First Love, Last Rites

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Abstract

First Love, Last Rites was one of the greatest works of English writer Ian McEwan, which led him to fame. The book was based on eight short-stories from eight teenagers' or youth's point of views. Among those stories, the men suffered from different dilemmas of sexual states, in which horror, violence, death, cruelty, absurdity, mildness and sadness were mixed and interwoven. Applying Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, the eight heroes in the book acted different unusual sexual behaviors because of abjection towards somebody or something in life. In the meantime, the readers could also introspect their status and identities through the stories. Thus, extreme as the plots in this novel, it is true that the mental state of abjection and disorientation still tortures people nowadays. Through this work, the readers may reflect on the life they are experiencing and build up their own self-identity.

Key words: Abjection; Self-identity; Psychical analysis; Alienation

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction of the Author and the Work

Ian McEwan is one of the greatest influences in the area of English literature and is famous for his unintrusive and exquisite narration to expose the inner intension and inquietude of modern people. Besides, he is good at depicting violence, death, love, desire and morality. His works are also full of weird and absurd elements showing the twist spirits in the modern society, and this also won him the name of "Ian Macabre"

Ian's parents married because of love affair, so that they expatriated themselves in other countries with the intention to forget the unbearable past, which influenced Ian's character on large extent. What's more, Ian's father was a alcoholic addict and a domestic violence recidivist, Ian was frightened by him and didn't have the ability to revolt, just consoled himself by playing and communicating with his imaginary brother Bernard. All together these caused Ian's love for literature and his later writing style.

First Love, Last Rites was the Master's thesis of Ian, bringing him both fame and notoriety because of explicit descriptions of sexual behaviors. Some scholars thought that there were too many anti-society actions in this book and the adolescence would be led to astray by the immoral descriptions. For example, this work involved some actions like murder, incest, violence and so on. Michael J. Adams said that "Ian's black humors were about murder, madness, parasexuality and all the diseased games people played on the modern wasteland" (Adams). While the supporters held the view that Ian's style was dark in his early period and called his works of this period as "literature of shock". One of Ian's teachers Malcolm Bradbury said his works were impressionist horrible fables about complex and dangerous relationships. (Luo, p.153)

However, in some aspects, Ian also gave the readers some hopes beneath the dark side of the life, just like Chinese writer Yu Hua commented: “It seems that Ian’s narration is always walking on the boundary, the boundary that splits the hope and despair, the horror and comfort, the coldness and warmth, the absurdity and reality, the violence and mildness and the ratiion and emotion. All in all, Ian’s narration is the kaleidoscope of these elements, makes him a king with the broad territory” (Yu, 2015).

1.2 Introduction of Abjection

The term comes from the Latin “abjecto”, means to throw under or move under. To be subordinate and inferior, to feel an attitude of shame and worthless. Abjection is the “civilized” response to anything that reminds us of the drives and desires we have thrown into the unconscious through repression during the Oedipal phase of development. The abject is what culture throws away, its garbage, or its waste products; examples of abject substances include excrement, blood and dead bodies. According to Kristeva, these substances recall the lack of division between self and other that characterizes the pre-Oedipal phase and things that are abject create a feeling of horror or disgust in the adult civilized viewer because they remind him or her of the time before differentiated selfhood; they threaten boundaries of the self and to return the viewer to a non-differentiated state of egolessness that is frightening to the self (Zhang, p.4). Besides, people could find self-identity through abjection, and abjection has the characteristic of helplessness, separation, horror and aestheticism.

2. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ABJECTION IN FIRST LOVE, LAST RITES

2.1 Helplessness

According to Kristeva, abjection bears the character of helplessness. “There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (p.181). “Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separate me from them. (p.181).

What Kristeva wants to show the readers is that the abject lives as a threaten to the subject and can show up anytime, anywhere. When confronting with the abject, people would experience “the sense of abjection” and consult to the actions like escape, vomiting and so on with deep helplessness. And according to Julia, the sense of

helplessness comes from the the awareness of subject or the object that lacking the difference with the others. For example, when people see someone dead and something like blood, they will think about the death of their own. Thus, in this sense, abjection stands as a border. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, “I” is expelled (Kristeva, p.3). Thus, abjection comes as a terrible fear and helplessness when one feels that no where to shelter himself or herself with the threatening of abject. Besides, one must build up a barrier between himself and the abject in case of lacking difference with it or becoming the abject of others (Wu, p.154).

In *Solid Geometry*, the hero and his wife Maisie live under the state of spiritual separation, Maisie condemns her husband for his indifferent attitude towards her. “All you have is books. Crawling over the past like a fly on a turd” (McEwan, p.235).

And the man thinks the nightmares his wife fears are meaningless, when she begs him to company her he even fall asleep and ignores her. Many of times he prefers to avoid his wife and sort out his grate -grand- father’s autobiography alone. “Some times, for complete privacy, I lock myself in the bathroom, sit on the toilet seat and balance the writing-pad on my knees” (McEwan, p.229). In this sense, the husband and wife become the abject of each other because of different life styles and detestation between them. So that their conflict becomes worth, they even beat each other fiercely and curse the hobbies of their lovers bitterly. Until one day Maisie breaks the collection of the man’s great-grandfather, it is a penis of Captain Nicholls. “She stretched forward and picked up the sealed jar containing Capt. Nicholls. As she lifted it his penis drifted dreamily from one end of the glass to the other.”

‘ You re so COMPLACENT’ Maisie shrieked, just before she hurled the glass bottle at the wall in front of my table. Instinctively I covered my face with my hands to shield off the shattering glass. As I opened my eyes I heard myself saying,

‘ Why did you do that? That belonged to my great-grandfather.’ Amid the broken glass and the raising stench of formaldehyde lay Capt. Nicholls, slouched across the leather covers of a volume of the diary, gray, limp and menacing, transformed from a treasured curiosity into a horrible obscenity (McEwan, p.239). The reader could find in this part that when the penis was dropped out and formaldehyde spread, the man felt sickness terribly. It was his awareness about the seem nature between himself and the captain that led to his abjection towards captain’s penis hopelessly. With the end of the story, the husband made his wife disappear during their sexual behavior. There, the last abject of the man disappeared forever.

On the one hand, the man's feeling of abjection towards his wife was because of their different life styles, on the other hand, the wife had the same attributes that the man owned. Such as the sense of alienation, solitude, difficulty of communicating and so on. Besides, the collection of the capt was a symbol of the life and experience of the great-grandfather and the capt, but when contrasted with the capt that had traveled all over the world, the great-grandfather was also an isolated "book worm" like the man. So when the bottle was broken and the Capt took on his ugly and disgusting shape, the man's deep solitude and isolation along the time was also brought up, the difference between himself and the great-grandfather and his wife evaporated at the moment, and the sense of abjection was irresistible and helpless.

What's more, in this story, the wife also felt the sense of abjection towards her endlessly nightmares that caused her nervousness and disorientation. She told her husband that "It was a horrible dream. I had it once before. I was in a plane flying over a desert. But it wasn't really a desert. I took the plane lower and I could see there were thousands of babies heaped up, stretching away into the horizon, all of them naked and climbing over each other. I was running out of fuel and I had to land plane. I tried to find a space, I flew on and on looking for a space..." (McEwan, p.228). This nightmare hunted the wife bitterly. But from the author's point of view, this scene can be seen as the symbol of the inquietude of modern society, the waste land that full of "glass mountains", "steel forests" and the burden of population. In this sense, the nightmare of Maisie could be every creature's nightmare in today's society and this plot could also cause the sense of abjection of the readers. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva tells us there is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact of recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded. One always passes too quickly over this word "want" (p.5). Therefore, everyone has his or her own abject, no matter it lives as poverty, working stress, bad living conditions or the short of communication with others, these abject seem to torture us at some point. And it were these abject that remind us of our nature or desire and want constantly and make us lost in helplessness. In this sense, abjection extends its meaning larger to the wide social significance. The people in modern society get a sense of self abjection helplessly because of various social factors and this is also a manifestation of that we are all hollow men in the waste land.

2.2 Separation

According to Kristeva, abjection means to separate with the "mother". It is the process of realizing the boundary between the subject itself and the mother, and later, others. Thus, the abjection towards the mother is the indispensable process of building up one's self-identity. Just as Julia expresses in her work: the abject would thus

be the "object" of primal repression. Perhaps because of maternal anguish, unable to be satisfied within the encompassing symbolic. The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, "with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (p.13).

In the story *Disguises*, the boy Henry lived with his aunt Mina, who was a retired actress of withered face and a slipping mind. On the one hand, Mina was addicted to acting in every aspect of life even at home, on the other hand, she forced young Henry to dress the wired clothes she prepared for him and to have a tea-time, talking with each other their experiences. During this forced period, Henry lost himself and became an afear puppet because of the girl's party frocks that arose his sense of abjection. In the mean time, he felt aunt's perverted love towards him. "Mina was a surreal mother"; "Sure she worried him, but for the rest she was not unkind, tea was ready in the afternoon when he came in from school, special treats, some favorite, custard cakes or toasted buns, and then the talk. Mina sketched out her day's impressions and confidences, more wife in these than aunt" (McEwan, p.352). It was this abjection, Henry felt to separate with aunt's control, he felt happy when he was with his student Linda, but this time, he gradually created identity towards his transvestism and thought his own gender and the girl's looking in the mirror a combination of himself and Linda, then he felt that he was broke up with aunt's mental and physical control. In this story, the abjects of Henry were aunt's perverted love and the girl's clothes. These abjects were the opposite side of the subject "I", and the things that "I" ejected, while the abjects also led the subject to collapse. Ejected as the abject, it could never disappear however, it stood up on the boundary, challenging the subject "I". But it was worth mentioning that abject had the important meaning when come to the question of one's self-identity, it was because the existence of the abject, the subject build up his self-identity, at the same time, got a strong sense of oppression. In the story, when the boy was controlled by aunt and lost his own mind, he was deprived of self-identity by the abject, when he get out of control of the abject, the identity came out; when he felt scared of girl's wear, he was also drowned by the sense of lost and disorientation, when he received his own appearance in the mirror, then came the self-identity. Then, when we turn our attention to the aunt, she was also an abject in others' eyes because of her poor memory and withered appearance, and then she became a grotesque. "Everything Mina did was to do with stage. Even when alone an audience watched and her actions were for them, a kind of superego, she dared not displease them or herself, so sinking with a moan to her bed after some exhaustion, that moan has shape and told. She felt at her back a thousand

eyes and was poised and carried each motion through to its end with a mind to its uniqueness (McEwan, p.351).

From these plots, the reader may find some bearings in the society we are living in, the problem of self-identity. We are still experiencing abjection nowadays. We all have somethings that we mean to abandon and we're all suffering from the anxiety of becoming the "other" and the margin of the society. There are too many prejudices on the age, gender, homosexuality, transvestite, etc. It is important to build up orders from disorders, and find our own self-consciousness and self-identities.

2.3 Horror

From the view of Kristeva, abjection has a certain nature of horror, and the object of the horror comes out when the state doesn't match the goal of one's desire. This is to say, all the disasters about desire happen because of disappointment when the result deviates from the goal of desire. On this level, the horror derives from the abject of people's desire. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva tells the reader the fear of which one can speak, the one therefore that has a signifiable object, is more belated and more logical product that assumes all earlier alarms of archaic, non-representable fear (p.34). In this sense, this kind of earlier alarms of archaic, non-representable fear can express in various forms during the person's life. The phobia of a certain thing becomes a hieroglyph that condenses all fears, from unnamable to namable. From archaic fears to those that accompany language learning, at the same time as familiarization with the body, the street, animals, people (p.34). What's more, Julia also tells us in former part that it is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order (p.4).

In *Homemade*, the boy experienced the desire and watched the cruel rules of the adult society in his young age. "And so by the age of fourteen I had acquired, with Raymond's guidance, a variety of pleasures which I rightly associated with the adult world. I smoke about ten cigarettes a day, I drank whisky when it was available, I had a connoisseur's taste for violence and obscenity (McEwan, p.253). And when talking about the working and life of adults around him, he showed a strong sense of abjection and satire. "I used to laugh when I thought of the twelve-hour shift my father worked in the flour mill, of his exhausted, blanched, ill-tempered face when he got home in the evening, and I laughed a little louder when I thought of the thousands who rest up on Sunday and then back again on Monday to toil in the mills, factories, timber yards and quaysides of London, returning each night older, more tired and no richer (McEwan, p.257). Most of the families of industrial society suffered from the hard work and constant poverty. In this way, the result of hard working was contrary from the goal of the boy and others, which arose his abjection and horror about life. Besides, when looking at the life of the boy's friend Raymond, his life also didn't satisfy his goal. "The world he showed

me, all its fascinating detail, lore and sin, the world for which he was a kind of standing master ode ceremonies, never really suited Raymond. He knew that world enough, but it- so to speak- did not want to know him" (McEwan, p.250). In stead of satisfaction, their desires always brought about disappointments and abjection and horror, and this horror came from the falls from expectations.

At last, the boy turned all of these disappointments and horrors into the incest with his 10 years old sister. However, both of them felt monotonous and bored about the adult world that they were interested with, the sexual experience of the boy with his sister frustrated him. "This may have been one of the most desolate couplings known to copulating mankind, involving lies, deceit, humiliation, incest, my partner falling asleep, my gnat's organism and the sobbing which filled the bedroom" (McEwan, p.269). The boy made himself into the adult world finally, but there would be deeper loneliness and disappointment waiting for him. The horror of abjection made him eager to break up with the children's world, sadly, he saw the same disorder and despair in the mirror of the adult world. This time, the horror of the broken desire came together with another abject- emptiness. Thus, all the results are contrary to desire. the horror of the abjection disturbs the inner world of the people and alienates the relationship of people constantly in the society we are living in.

In another story *First Love, Last Rites*, the young lovers also experienced horror of abjection. During their long life of disorder, there were too much nasty smell, the illness of girl's body, the addiction to sex of the boy and the never fulfilled dreams. In the story, their life was accompanied by the horrible sounds of scratching the wall. At the same time, the boy was annoyed by the dirty working conditions and the dirty similar working suit of the girls', and about himself, his wish to catch eels never came true. All that surrounding their life was the unnamed horror and contradictions of their desires.

At last, the story ended with their finding of the horrible abject- a giant rat and they killed it. After this, the girl quit her job in the factory and the boy set the eel free, and only in this way could they reconcile with life after the long journey of sound and fury.

Above all, desires of the subject have a strong connection with abjection, in which the horrors live together with jouissance. People must try to solve the conflict between desires and real life so that they could over come the horror of abjection. This is also the question we are facing nowadays: How to face the spiritual trauma brought by the horrible abjection and the spiritual crisis of modern society. This is very important for the spiritual growth of us.

2.4 Aestheticism

In addition to the former characters, Julia also holds the view that abjection has something to do with aestheticism, she regards that abjection is a combination of fear and

jouissance, and when the misery becomes severe, it can be seen as a passion to some extent (Han, p.119). For it is out of such straying on excluded ground that he draws his jouissance. The abject from which he does not cease separating is for him, in short, a land of oblivion that is constantly remembered (Kristeva, p.8). Apart from this, through analyzing the theory of psychoanalysis, Kristeva draws the conclusion that one seeks his or her own jouissance through abjection thus builds up self-identity. From the view of the writer of this thesis, violence is a typical theme that arises one's sense of antipathy strongly, but when handled with some techniques, it may also attract the viewer with aesthetic effect. Aestheticization of violence for example. This kind of technique depicts violence through the ways of aestheticization, which takes on the audience with the violent aspect of the human being through a poetic scene or camerawork, thus the setting of violence will be ritualized and symbolized with fabulous visual or auditory elements, as a result the audience will not feel ill at ease because the aesthetic sense has been expanded through this technique.

In the story *Butterflies*, a lonely boy who had lost his parents seduced a little girl through making up a lie of butterflies, then killed her by drowning her in the canal. The scenes and plots of the story was full of violent and horrible elements under the cover of aesthetic arts.

After killing the girl, the boy was summoned by the police, before going there, he refreshed himself carefully. "In the late afternoon I decided to take a bath and dress up. I had time to kill. I founded a bottle of cologne I had never opened before, and a clean shirt. While the bath ran I took off my clothes and stared my body in the mirror. I am a suspicious-looking person, I know, because I have no chin" (McEwan, p.299). and then his mind came to his mother, "My chin and my neck are the same thing, and it breeds distrust. My mother's was like that, too. Only after I had left home did find her grotesque. She died last year. Women do not like my chin, they won't come near me. It was same for my mother, she never had friends. She went everywhere alone, even on holidays. Each year she went to Littlehampton and sat in a deck-chair by her self, facing out to sea" (McEwan, p.300). From this part, the author depicted the reader a feast of ritual, in which the boy dressed himself up and observed himself with the free flow of mind. Obviously, the sense of disorientation, alienation and the loneliness during the pale dark days flowed out slowly with a few drops of cologne and a clean shirt. Then his mother's loneliness, and then, the whole society's.

In addition, the author referred "ice cream" for two times. The first time was happened when the girl was alive, he wiped ice-cream for her. "I pulled her towards me and cupped my life hand round her towards me and cupped my left hand round the back of her neck. I wetted the forefinger of the other hand, the way I had seen parents

to do it, and ran it around her lips. I had never touched another person's lips before, nor had I experienced this kind of pleasure" (McEwan, p.308). The next time was after the crime. "Round the corner I heard the tinkle of an ice-cream van and I realized I was thirsty. It was playing something out of a Mozart piano sonata. It stopped abruptly, in the middle of a note, as if someone had kicked the machine. I walked quickly up the street but when I got to the corner it had gone. A moment later I heard it again, and it sounded a long way off" (McEwan, p.299). From the first part, the boy filled his warmth in it, because that the touch with the girl reminded him of his parents. And then the later part, the boy suffered from loneliness again after killing the girl, and this deep solitude was expressed by the fading out tinkling of piano. Among these monologue, the aesthetic art of visual and auditory diluted the cruel fact that boy meant to seduced the girl to death. The reader would enjoy the warmth rather than feeling sick of the violence.

In the end, the development of the plot was the course of the little girl's pursuit of the butterflies, she was interested in the illusion the boy created and even showed tenderness toward a flower. Her views of the depressing industrial society world was still very pure and innocent. "Where the sunlight entered the tunnel a little way there was a flower growing from between bricks. It looked like some kind of dandelion, growing out of a small tuft of grass. 'It's coltsfoot,' she said, and picked it and put it in her hair, behind her ear" (McEwan, p.310). At last, she was drowned in the canal. Her silhouette against the sky suddenly disappeared into the black. She was lying face down when I reached her, with her left leg trailing off the path almost into the water. She had banged her head going down and there was a swelling over her right eye. Her right arm was stretched out in front of her and almost reached into the sunlight. I bent down to her face and listened to her breathing. It was deep and regular. Her eyes were closed tight and the lashes were still wet from crying. I no longer wanted to touch her, that was all pumped out of me now, into the canal. I brushed away some dirt from her face and some more from the back of her red dress. 'silly girl,' I said, 'no butterflies.' Then I lifted her up gently, as gently as I could so as not to wake her, and eased her quietly into the canal (McEwan, p.313). The picture of the girl's death was full of aesthetic elements, such as the color of the black silhouette and the red dress, the shade of the sunset and the tears on her lashes. All of these elements eased the readers' sickness towards the violence of the crime. Instead, the readers could see a dirty flower bred out of modern industrial civilization and a broken winged butterfly died in sunlight.

Actually, the essence of the aestheticization of violence lies in not the violence itself, but to manifest that the violence and desire are inevitable. This is not to say that everyone bears the character of violence, but to show that

violence always exists among people or animals in one way or another. Kristeva found the psychological factors of abjection, she thought that people's sense of abjection derived from the "original repression" and then turn into fear and enjoyment. Just like the hero of this story. The repression came from the loneliness of losing parents and living in the modern industrial society, the boy feared the sense of loneliness but enjoyed it at the same time, he was accustomed to the violent action of other boys to roast a cat on the fair, and it seemed natural that he drown the girl in the canal. In this way, "Ian Macabre" reminds us that the effects of industrial civilization still exist in our daily life and nobody can be an outsider.

CONCLUSION

Beneath the Ian's sharp writing style, there were all kinds of grotesques in the modern alienated society. There was a deadly helpless husband who has difficulty in communicating with his wife so that he made her disappear finally; there was a transvestite who lost his self-identity under his aunt's control; there was a rebellious teenager who designed an action of incest after seeing the dirty rules of adult world; there was an habitual loafer who was troubled by the reality, and there was also a cold blooded killer who drown a girl calmly because of all year round haunted loneliness. Ian showed us these people with a extreme but aesthetic technique, in which the reader may also reflect their own state and identity. The readers may rekindle the quiet passion after seeing the madness, the death and despair.

What's more, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection brings up a new perspective on the analysis of this novel. Through abjection, the reader could connect the helplessness, separation, horror and aestheticism of it with the extreme actions of the characters in the book *First Love, Last Rite*. This will help us to analyses the reasons

why the depressed and frustrated young people result to the extreme actions in their lives and help us to detect their painful attempts to establish identities.

Nowadays, the theory of abjection has been added up some social significance of reality for its using in analyzing the marginal groups. Such as the poor, transvestite, the queer, the colored and so on. However, believe it or not, we are all suffered marginal group or the "other" in some way, and we are all eager to build up self-identity in the modern waste land. On the one hand, Kristeva's theory of abjection unveil the mask of spiritual trauma and social causes of the characters' behaviors in *First Love, Last Rites*, on the other hand, it puts forward expectations for the spiritual growth and the establishment of correct self-identities of modern people.

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