Embracing the Abject: A Journey to Jouissance

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While many ethical paradigms, including the Judeo-Christian, connect the human subject’s fascination with the abject—or things that are unclean, impure, immoral and horrific—with death and damnation, theorists Julia Kristeva and George Bataille postulate a relationship between the abject and moral development (Kristeva) and states of grace (Bataille). This essay recapitulates Julia Kristeva’s argument in “Approaching Abjection” that the abject is necessary toward the development of the superego is the Freudian/Lacanian developmental model. The essay then explains Georges Bataille’s contention that there is a jouissance capable only through the embrace of the abject. Finally, the essay analyzes the novel Querelle by Jean Genet to show how Genet’s characters use the abject to develop a superego and explore two novels of Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita and Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle, to demonstrate that Nabokov’s characters reach states of grace after embracing things that are abject.

Is Sexual Harassment Law Essentialist?

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Legal scholar Linda Kelly Hill (2003) argues that sexual harassment case law is essentialist. Essentialism is the idea that objects have essences, intrinsic properties that make up their true nature; essentialists assume that there are ‘essential’ biological features that constitute what it means to be male or female. Feminist scholars seek to avoid essentialist theorizing, arguing that other factors, such as cultural factors, better characterize individuals such that the dichotomous categories of male and female are unfair labels. Hill argues that what she terms the “feminist misstep” has defined sexual harassment law in an essentialist way that focuses on the difference between sexes; although this approach favors female plaintiffs, it inappropriately portrays them as “victims” and males as “aggressors.” Thus, sexual harassment case law ends up actually harming males and females alike. In this paper, I analyze Hill’s methodology and perform a textual reading of federal case law to assess the validity of her claims.