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“Suddenly Afraid”: Challenged Identities and Disrupted Meaning in Lydia Davis’s Short Fiction

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Abstract: Implementing Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, the present study attempts to demonstrate that the short fiction of Lydia Davis, contemporary American writer, is, first and foremost, about the fragility of identity and the precariousness of its borders. Using a descriptive-analytical approach and Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* as the main source in which she delineates her theory, this paper studies four of Lydia Davis’s short stories in depth. Abjection is the process in which the subject casts aside anything foreign to the self, or the ‘abject,’ at an early stage, to safely procure a coherent I. By detecting and interpreting two of the abject’s main manifestations, namely women and corpses, the current article will contend that Davis’s characters/narrators are always already stuck in seemingly bottomless pits of identity crises, both inside and through their use of language. Analyzing Davis’s “The Thirteenth Woman,” “Suddenly Afraid,” “Grammar Questions,” and “Letter to a Funeral Parlor,” this research tries to unravel the intricacies of maintaining shaken identities and endangered subjectivities at the face of unimaginable horror. Although discarded repeatedly by the characters in these stories, the abject never vanishes; it keeps haunting the periphery of selfhood and the solidarity of meaning.

Keywords: Identity; Abjection; the Abject; Short Story; the Self.

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1. Introduction

The fiction written by Lydia Davis (1947-) fits in the descriptions and checks all the boxes when it comes to surpassing literary conventions. Her "short-short" stories often sit "on a line between poetry and prose" or "essay and fiction", but their conceptual impact runs far more profound than their deceptively simple narrative line (Davis, *Essays One*). Most of Davis's "genre-defying pieces" (McDonald 15), and "protean stories" lack conventional plotlines or complex characterization (Locke 12), and because of their extreme concision, they have been subcategorized under the flash fiction rubric (Perloff 208; Evans 3). Although not a poet, "Davis is one of the few writers" whose work appeared in both anthologies of *The Best American Short Stories* and *The Best American Poetry* (McDonald 16). Despite their short length, the stories revolve around a wide range of "philosophical" and psychological issues (Knight and Davis 198). A highly intelligent observer, Davis contemplates the subtlest quotidian topics and weaves them into the broader web of the human condition. In the course of five main collections of short stories and one novel and with a "distinctive voice" that "has never been easy to fit into conventional categories" (Boddy 220), Davis has moved "in the direction of less and less fiction and more and more philosophical investigation" (Prose and Davis 57). Identity and Language are the two main strands of her philosophy, a fact that makes her fiction ready ground for a study informed by the theories of the Bulgarian-French philosopher, Julia Kristeva (1941-).

In a rather convoluted essay that merges "the colloquial and the formal, the lyrical and the matter-of-fact, the concrete and the abstract," Kristeva sets out to delineate a fundamental stage in the psychosexual development of the child, namely abjection (Roudiez viii). Dipping in the waters of the "interrelationships among literature, philosophy, linguistics, and psychoanalysis" (Payne 1), and focusing on "the question of identity," she expounds her theory (Moi 12). Estelle Barrett summarizes the definitions presented in Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) beautifully:

> [A] physiological functioning that maintains the boundaries between mother and child before birth; a primary process that is fundamental to the emergence of language and the development of the ego; a revulsion that serves to maintain the borders between the subject and that which threatens life; primal fear. (5)

A crucial part of identity-formation around the age of 4 to 8 months, abjection casts off anything and anyone that seems to be on our way to a coherent and polished sense of self. So the abject can be described as "Not me": anything that we tend to throw away to embolden the boundaries of the self (Kristeva 2). Therefore, "what one spits out, rejects, almost violently excludes from oneself" comprises the various faces of the abject later in life (McAfee 46). As complicated as it is fundamental, the stage does not terminate for good.

Ironically, the abject and our confrontations with it long after the process is mediated prove to be the most challenging aspect of the entire procedure. The abject poses a threat and imposes the horror of indistinction between inside and outside and between self and other. It summons the subject to a place where they "almost ceases to be" (Becker-Leckrone 33). It has a dual nature: what once had helped shape identity turns into "a horrifying something" that threatens it (35). Addressing this paradoxical character, Kristeva defines the abject as "a burden both repellent and repelled, a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate" (6). Another noteworthy feature of the abject is that it is never annihilated altogether; it threatens identity and meaning long after being banished (2). Thus, abjection "is not a passing stage in a person's development. It remains a companion through the whole of one's life" (McAfee 49). As it results from "a violent clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back," the abject remains close the entire time, staring the subject in the eyes and planning a comeback (Kristeva 13).

Although there are occurrences of almost all the manifestations of the abject in the fiction of Lydia Davis, the present study focuses on two of its most essential embodiments: the abject mother and the dead body. With an emphasis on identity crisis and disruption of meaning, this article will analyze Davis's "The Thirteenth Woman," "Suddenly Afraid," "Grammar Questions," and "Letter to a Funeral Parlor" in length; it will in fact attempt to find out the relationship between the recurrence of dead bodies and rejected women in the selection of stories and the identity question as presented by Julia Kristeva. Trying to shed light on why the abject resurfaces in the pages of these stories, the current research shall demonstrate that Davis's fiction is first and foremost about how identity is not fixed and how it is endangered and reconstituted after every encounter with the abject. This paper will posit that Lydia Davis's stories meld and weave subtle strands of the psychic processes into literature—a fact that makes them ready ground for a study informed by a Kristevan analysis and that helps highlight the novelty of the research. After a brief introduction to Davis's experimental fiction, this article will illustrate the notion of the abject and two of its main manifestations, followed by a detailed discussion of the four stories under the light of the concept of abjection. It will then conclude that "on the fragile border [...] where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject," Davis's fiction flourishes (Kristeva 207). By reflecting and representing abjection in her fiction, Davis reminds us that the self is endangered in these experiences, thus rendering all sense of identity and meaning moot.

2. Review of Literature

Being a relatively developing area of research, Davis studies has expanded to a few book-length analyses and several scholarly articles, book chapters, and interviews, all of which revolve around the various aspects of the writer's life and work. A firm believer in the fluidity and fragility of identity, Davis herself has commented on the topic several times. Yet, none of the available literature has been comprehensively and solely dedicated to the identity question from a psychoanalytical, and specifically Kristevan point of view. For instance, Paul McDonald's *Lydia Davis: A Study* (2018) discusses several of her key stories and briefly examines identity as a prevalent theme. After mapping out Davis's biographical and literary background, the book focuses on the philosophy that informs her work and the universe it shapes. Jonathan Evans's *The Many Voices of Lydia Davis: Translation, Rewriting, Intertextuality* (2016) investigates the possible interconnections between Davis's career as a translator, from French to English, and her work as a fiction-writer. The book concludes that, in fact, Davis's translation works have, in many ways, influenced and informed her fiction by enriching and altering it.

Christopher J. Knight's 1999 interview gives us a rather unique perspective into the nature of the author's world. Published in *Contemporary Literature* journal, it is a fantastic and lengthy reading into the creative processes by which Davis comes up with her minimalistic and breathtaking stories. In this interview, she talks about how her translation of French masters such as Proust has probably affected her own writing style and led her to produce pieces with the centrality of memory and perception. She details her writing habits and explains the philosophical nature of her work. In another valuable article called "Lydia Davis's Own Philosophical Investigation: 'The End of the Story'," Knight delves into Davisian themes of memory and identity that inform both her long and short fiction. It is noteworthy that although McDonald and Knight dabble with "identity" as a Davisian theme, their works fail to provide a detailed look into the subject and how it relates to the concept of the abject presented by Julia Kristeva. What they do instead is to look at how subjectivity and identity are essential themes for Davis, as there are quite a few stories in her oeuvre with this centrality.

As for the theoretical backbone of the work, Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* is used as the methodological guideline for this study. The book:

> with its expansion of primary rejection to include the child's relation to its mother's sex and its own birth, points to a semiotic structure inherent in the continuation of the species that prefigures the separation and rejection required in order to enter the Symbolic. (Oliver 5)

In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva sets out to delineate the concept of abjection as the very foundation on which a sense of self and identity rests. Among the numerous Kristeva scholars, Kelly Oliver stands out as one of the most essential reads. She is a prominent Kristeva Scholar whose work has continued to fascinate people who want to approach the work of the great philosopher and psychoanalyst for the first time. Her book *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind* (1993) is a magnificent detailed look into the work of the Bulgarian-French thinker. She explores Kristeva's concepts of subject-in-process, language, and signification in the larger frame of possible explanations for women's oppression. The next concept she elaborates upon is Kristeva's abjection, an elaboration that proved highly useful for my work. Her other work, which she edited with Lisa Walsh, *Contemporary French Feminism*, also explores the work of the prominent French Feminists, Kristeva included (Although Kristeva rejects the label), and digs into the deeper layers of the question of sexual difference as is central to the work and thought of French feminists in general. Oliver's other works, like Kristeva's, address questions of identity and subjectivity, language, and women's studies.

There are also several articles applying Kristeva's theories to major literary works; these works set an example and served as models for the application section of this research. The following articles are only a few of scholarly works: A study by Calkins (1996) looks for the traces of the abject and the process of abjection in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and rightly so, as the entire novel revolves around a dead body. A paper by Harris (2014) works on the abject as evident in the work of Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923). She argues that the milk and blood that Kristeva talks about in *Powers of Horror* are the favorite liquids of Mansfield's fiction. Similarly, Taylor's paper (2006) focuses on a host of Kristevan themes, abjection included, as presented in Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves* (1931). The article also discusses how Kristeva distinguishes between male and female relations to revolutionary language. A similar paper by Franklin (1998) works on the abjection as written out in the works of Joyce Carol Oates (1938-). It detects the almost violent world of Oates's works through a Kristevan reading.

3. Theoretical Framework

The definition of abjection, as put forward by Julia Kristeva in her seminal *Powers of Horror*, is the procedure by which we exclude anything that seems unessential to a healthy and coherent sense of self; it was through this system that human beings first segregated his clan from that of the animal kingdom. Kristeva explains: "Thus by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder" (12-13). The process induces a great deal of fright in the subject, almost leaving them in unutterable shock: "abjection is, for Kristeva, an experience of unmatched primordial horror, putting the subject in the most devastating kind of crisis imaginable" (Becker-Leckrone 20). As the "immemorial violence" on which rests our very idea of subjectivity, the process of abjection poses a threat to identity and meaning unmatched by any other form of fear (Kristeva 10).

"Throughout her text, Kristeva explores the dynamics of the subject-object-abject relation by considering radical instances in which subjective distinction becomes most precarious" (Becker-Leckrone 36). The reason why the abject is so horrible and horrid is that as "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite", it threatens the borderline between subject and object and between self and other, and therefore "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 2). The "immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady" (4) abject is also "pre-identity, presubject, preobject" (Oliver 57). As the disrupter of borders, the abject itself is "neither subject nor object" (Kristeva 1); it is: "something repulsive that both attracts and repels… It is neither one nor the other. It is undecidable" (Oliver 55-56). This same quality of belonging neither to the realm of the subject nor that of the object makes comprehending the abject's position quite hard.

Kristeva counts mothers, corpses, foreigners, food, and taboos among the most prominent abjects — things, people and states that remind us of the fragility of the borders of identity and meaning. As Barrett comments, "Abjection assumes different codings from culture to culture and according to various symbolic systems. Some of its variants include defilement, food, taboo and sin" (95). But the primary abject that repeatedly shows its face in the fiction of Lydia Davis is the child's mother with whom (s)he is in thorough and unbreakable unity prior to abjection: "…the mother's body is the first object to be abjected, and this process of separation sets down the early demarcations that later give rise to language and the constitution of the ego" (Barrett 95). This immediate departure is so crucial that according to Oliver: "Human life, human society, is founded on the abject separation" from the mother (57), so "expelling/rejecting" her becomes the very first step in the long and winding path of abjection (Lechte 159). Thus, finding the footprints of the first abject, this article will dig deeper into the abjectness of the presence of women in the selected stories, analyzing and exploring its link to identity.

Besides the abject mother, whose banishment has, by extension, led to the abjection of women in general, the dead body is among the most horrifying abjects and “the most sickening of wastes” that people the pages of Davis’s stories (Kristeva 3). “Both human and non-human” (Lechte 160), the corpse is “death—not signified but incarnate” (Becker-Leckrone 35). Alternately described by Kristeva as “cesspool and death” (3), the dead body is “…the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death” (71). Becker-Leckrone phrases facing the dead body as “the ultimate encounter” (34), reminding us of death’s insistent materiality. With a borderline state, and as “a filth to which one has blood ties,” the corpse is the abject pollution to life, and a reminder that it will end (Calkins 92). The only thing the subject can do at the face of this ultimate abject is to try to pull away from it so as not to be afflicted with death. Attempting to analyze the reappearance of dead bodies in Davis’s short stories, this research will try to connect the dots and make a link between the corpses in question and the identity of the narrators of these stories.

4. Analysis

4.1. The Abject Mother and Woman as Other

Primarily linked to the mother and her body, abjection goes back to the time when there were no borders as such for the subject; to successfully carve out an “I” during the process, the baby who once saw itself as the same with the mother and her corporal being has to break away from “the mother-child symbiosis” (Kristeva 43). Subsequently, accepting “the mother as other” (32), the child negotiates the difficult passage of discarding her and guaranteeing its own independence; according to Oliver “making the mother abject allows the child to separate from her and become autonomous” (61). Notwithstanding the difficulty of the phase, it must be mediated for a healthy sense of self to develop.

In an extended version of this process, the abject mother becomes the abject woman. This “misdirected abjection” (Oliver 49) “illuminates how the feminine has come to be associated with the abject and the monstrous” in patriarchal societies (Barrett 97). So, similar to the abject mother, women, in general, have been exiled to this secondary position with which the central character in “The Thirteenth Woman” is not unfamiliar. The first Davis story that best epitomizes this imposed state of abjection and its relation to the delicacy of identity reads as follows:

> In a town of twelve women there was a thirteenth. No one admitted she lived there, no mail came for her, no one spoke of her, no one asked after her, no one sold bread to her, no one bought anything from her, no one returned her glance, no one knocked on her door; the rain did not fall on her, the sun never shone on her, the day never dawned on her, the night never fell for her; for her the weeks did not pass, the years did not roll by; her house was unnumbered, her garden untended, her path not trod upon, her bed not slept in, her food not eaten, her clothes not worn; and yet in spite of all this she continued to live in the town without resenting what it did to her. (Davis, *Collected*)

Reflecting the characteristics of the abject perfectly, the short story has a lot to offer regarding identity crisis. Ironically, the abject that the central character faces in "The Thirteenth Woman" is herself. As the outsider, she is subject to ignorance, rejection, and abjection. Since she belongs to the unfortunate community of "strays and exiles and outcasts" (Becker-Leckrone 32), she bears "constraint" and "frustration" in her community (Kristeva and Mock 83). Ignored to the point of invisibility, she is the foreigner "by whom the abject exists" (Kristeva 8). Referring to women's "feeling of invisibility," the story explores one of the most profound philosophical questions: the integrity of the concept of identity (Davis, *Shaping*). The unity of identity proves to be an illusion at the face of the abject and even more so when the abject is internalized.

The problem with the thirteenth woman is that she is doubly abjected: she is an exile within a community of her own kind. Once discarded, the abject cannot and will not be reabsorbed, so she "lies there, quite close," but "cannot be assimilated" (Kristeva 1). As the abject, she "threatens the unity/identity of both society and the subject" calling "into question the boundaries upon which they are constructed" (Oliver 56). Therefore, no one wants anything to do with her, and everyone shuns her presence. Since she poses a real danger, the community tries to get rid of her by ignoring her completely, but the main purpose of the abject is to stick around and remind the subject that she/he is not the unified being they might have thought. Peripheral, always hovering about, never leaving, the thirteenth woman keeps living in a society that profoundly despises her. Despite the avoidance, the repugnance, and the abjection, she continues to maintain her invisible state of being, threatening and challenging the subjectivity and meaning for the people who initially outcast her.

The next story that contributes to Davis's larger theme of challenged identity at the face of the abject is "Suddenly Afraid," which returns to the Kristevan concept of the abjection of women. In this story, we see a struggle at once with subjectivity, womanhood and coming to terms with the imposed status of abjection. The story reads in its entirety:

"because she couldn't write the name of what she was: a wa wam owm owamn womn" (Davis, *Collected*). As with so many other Davis stories, the title complements the story; in other words, the central character is startled because she cannot spell out the word that presumably denotes her identity. Almost stammering and amid a severe identity crisis, she is looking long and hard to find herself, the scattered letters and syllables on the page symbolizing this confusion. Drawn "to the limits of its own defining boundaries," the central character keeps asking, "What is that? Is that me? What am I?" (Becker-Leckrone 32). There is a state of liminality, ambiguity and in-between-ness to people who have been abjectified by society. Be they foreigners, women, exiles or minorities, they are constantly assigned a secondary position, the position of objects, against whom subjectivity can hold strong for another group of people.

Despite its extreme brevity, "Suddenly Afraid" encapsulates the subject's strives to maintain a disrupted identity. If we assume the word to equal its meaning or the signifier to equal the signified, then the protagonist of this one-line story has forgotten her socio-sexual essence. As "[…] the subject […]is produced by structures of meaning," and as there is no meaning in the absence of words, it is subjectivity that is missing in this story (Becker-Leckrone 22). In a moment of sheer horror, here we have a woman face to face with her societal position, as though her abjectness has "suddenly" dawned on her and disrupted her grip on sense-making. Confronted by herself then, she faces "a weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes" her (Kristeva 2). Playing a linguistic game, Davis has best described the encounter with the abject within as "the abjection of self" that the protagonist experiences in this story (5). It seems that for her, "nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory" of her former self (5). "On the edge of non-existence," she keeps spelling wrong syllables (2). Looking the abject in the eyes, the woman is trying her best to put together a shattered sense of self. The conspicuous absence of a full stop at the end of the story might refer to the infinite nature of the allure of the abject and its constant threat to identity. In both "The Thirteenth Woman" and "Suddenly Afraid," the subject wonders who she is and what this means as she is simultaneously crushed and wooed by the abject within; apparently, she will keep doing so for an unknown length of time.

4.2. The Ultimate Abject: The Corpse

The next embodiment of the abject to be discussed here is the dead body, and the first Davis story that portrays a deep obsession with it is "Grammar Questions." The story is written through a series of grammatical queries and observations about the narrator's dying father. Positing a barrage of "grammar questions," which lasts for almost the entire story, the narrator, apparently sitting by the father's deathbed, obsessively engages in a futile rumination over his death, and the reader is catapulted, almost in medias res, into what can be regarded as the narrator's primary concern – coming to terms with "the rubric of the *body*" (Kristeva and Henric 231). Towards the beginning of the story we read:

> People may say "the body" and then call it "it." I will not be able to say "the body" in relation to him because to me he is still not something you would call "the body." People may say "his body," but that does not seem right either. It is not "his" body because he does not own it, if he is no longer active or capable of owning anything. (Davis, *Collected*)

With a rather disturbing subject matter, the story becomes even more unsettling as it moves forward.

What reads like the narrator's puzzled fixation on syntax and semantics in trying to tackle the father's imminent death is arguably a horrid confrontation with the abject that by nature "…disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4). According to Kristeva, the corpse is "the utmost of abjection" since it literally breaks down the subject-object distinction crucial for maintaining the borders of the symbolic order (4). Oliver clarifies: "The Symbolic can maintain itself only by maintaining its borders, and the abject points to the fragility of those borders" (56). The narrator's constant interrogations thus can be interpreted as attempts at preserving, rather hopelessly, the frail mechanics of meaning-making and of the self.

"Abjection is above all ambiguity" (Kristeva 9). Its highly paradoxical character threatens the borders of the self and maintains them simultaneously. The narrator's perplexity and distress in dealing with their crumbling father's sight might well point to this feeling of "ambiguity." The narrator continues to ruminate:

> I will still say "my father," but maybe I will say it only as long as he looks like my father, or approximately like my father. Then, when he is in the form of ashes, will I point to the ashes and say, "That is my father"? Or will I say, "That was my father"? Or "Those ashes were my father"? Or "Those ashes are what was my father"? (Davis, *Collected*)

In the face of the abject, "[m]eaning collapses" (Kristeva 2), and identity breaks down (Oliver 56). The father in this story, "frowning slightly" with "half-open eyes" and an "open mouth," appears to be disrupting the boundaries of meaning and identity for the subject child, and thus forcing them to keep positing contemplative comments as an ineffective means to ward off the abject, dispel its merciless forays into their integrity, and restore a sense of being into the picture (Davis, *Collected*).

The story "Letter to a Funeral Parlor" is another proof of the reappearance of corpses in Davis's fiction, and it is similar to "Grammar Questions" in that the themes and nature of the obsessions almost overlap. In this twin story, the narrator is also obsessing over the death and burial, yet again, of the father. Written in the form of a letter, the story depicts the narrator's coming to terms with the identity crisis at the face of the abject. At the beginning of a series of polite objections to a funeral agent we read: "Dear Sir, I am writing to you to object to the word *cremains,* which was used by your representative when he met with my mother and me two days after my father's death" (Davis, *Collected*). Once again, the nature of the observations is mostly linguistic: "We had no objection to your representative, personally, who was respectful and friendly and dealt with us in a sensitive way […] What startled and disturbed us was the word *cremains*" (Davis, *Collected*). Having just encountered their father's corpse, the narrator has been put in "intolerable proximity" to death, a state of sheer shock following it (Becker-Leckrone 34).

The horror of the dead body stems from the fact that what used to be a subject surpasses the seemingly impregnable border and becomes an object. As Kristeva elaborates, "[a] decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, …the corpse represents fundamental pollution" (109). Once more, the narrator's struggle in coming to terms with the death of the father and with staring the abject in the eyes, resurfaces as a pedantic obsession with semantics:

> There is nothing wrong with inventing words, especially in a business. But a grieving family is not prepared for this one. We are not even used to our loved one being gone. You could very well continue to employ the term *ashes*. (Davis, *Collected*)

As a reminder of death and as "a border from which the body must extricate itself in order to live" (Barrett 95), the father's corpse seems to have put the narrator in a double bind. Thus it is safe to say that underneath the narrator's linguistic conundrums about the father's state lies a confused horror of and revolt for the dead body. Deep down, the narrator is appalled and shocked and thus tries hard to keep a distance from the corpse by the only means available: words.

There is a profound irony at work in the two stories: beneath all the grief-stricken questions and observations runs the joy of still belonging to the land of being. Kristeva illustrates this joy of revelling in the corpse's presence: "There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border"

(3). Thus, both narrators, almost on the brink of disintegration, rejoice in being still alive and able to talk about the father, even after his death: "When he is dead, I will be able to say, in the past tense, 'He lived in Vernon Hall.' I will also be able to say, 'He died in Vernon Hall'" (Davis, *Collected*). Standing there, on the verge of negotiating the challenging passage of abjection, the narrators are both fascinated and revolted by the abject. There, on the fine line between living and death, they are experiencing one of the most challenging passages of life: staving off death and trying to preserve an already tenuous grasp on subjectivity.

5. Conclusion

Exploring a selection of four short stories by Lydia Davis, this paper looked into the Kristevan concept of abjection and its link to identity. The bold presence of two main embodiments of the abject stood out from a detailed analysis of the stories. Both abject women and dead bodies in "The Thirteenth Woman," "Suddenly Afraid," "Grammar Questions," and "Letter to a Funeral Parlor" impose a grave threat to identity and meaning. As discussed earlier, pointing to the fragility of the boundaries of the self is the primary purpose of the glaring existence of the abject in the pages of Davis's work. The four stories serve as a proof that Lydia Davis's short fiction is concerned with identity and how it is shaped and maintained, more than the body of scholarly work has so far discovered. The protagonists in "The Grammar Questions" and "Letter to a Funeral Parlor" encounter death, destruction, and utter dissolution of identity in the presence of a dead body; in "The Thirteenth Woman" and "Suddenly Afraid" though, the confrontation is with the abject within, a fact that makes the experience doubly complicated to negotiate.

Abject confrontations populate the pages of Davis's work, and it is in the confluence of identity crisis and disruption of meaning that her stories burgeon. Identity is threatened, reconstituted, and re-shaped in stories concerned with shaping and maintaining a sense of self. The abject reemerges at moments of high criticality, drawing attention to itself only by causing distress and unease. The utter horror and shock at the face of the abject is reflected in the characters'/narrators' use of language. Be it a stammering or an unbelievable obsession with word choice, these characters struggle to give meaning to their highly grotesque emotions. Tongue-tied and dumbfounded, they set about a journey of redefining the self. Faced with the abject in its various disguises, the characters at the center of these stories strive for a better understanding of the situation and themselves. Trying hard to uphold the borders of selfhood, they witness boundaries crumble and doubts arise. Unutterably morbid by nature, these chance meetings with the abject render these people distraught and unsettled; through their slanted perception, we begin to discern the central theme of these short pieces: a challenge to identity and meaning. Lurking in the corner, the abject and its presence prove inextricable from threats to identity and meaning. The characters' eventually feeble attempts at preserving the borders of identity prove to have been in vain by the end of the story.

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