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Dead Animals: Uncanny and Abject Imagery in Ann Quin’s Berg
Jennifer Komorowski, Brescia University College

Abstract: In her novel Berg, Ann Quin creates a hidden subtext through the use of uncanny and abject Egyptian imagery. By using the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva to unravel the meaning behind imagery such as mummified animals, recurrent cat images, and the double, we can expose the underlying symbolism in the novel. The features of the uncanny that are especially significant to Berg are the return of the repressed and the idea of uncontrolled repetition. The repetition of cat imagery, often in the form of wet fur, signals the return of the repressed housecat Sebastian which is representative of Berg’s underlying Oedipus complex. The cat imagery is connected, through the Egyptian goddess Bastet to Berg’s mother and Judith, his pseudo-stepmother. The idea that Judith’s room is an Egyptian tomb, filled with mummified animals, increases our uncanny reaction to her because of the continued repetition of Egyptian imagery.

Keywords: experimentalism, psychoanalysis, uncanny, abject, Quin

In her novel Berg, Ann Quin creates a hidden subtext through her use of uncanny and abject Egyptian imagery. Sigmund Freud identifies the uncanny as that which is frightening and alienating, but is actually old and familiar; likewise Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject examines “where boundaries between the self and the other break down and cease to exist” (Freud 370; Lodine-Chaffey 206). The uncanny imagery in Berg takes the form of taxidermal animals and the persistent presence of the dead cat Sebastian, thus providing the familiarity of domestic animals as well as the frightening unfamiliarity of the dead. It is only natural that the uncanny imagery in Berg forms a subtext, repressed behind Aly Berg’s own story of abjection, which when examined closely refocuses the story on Judith and her role as both a femme fatale and a mother figure to the abject Berg.

The Western world has long held a fascination with Ancient Egypt; in the twentieth century Egyptomania reached a high point in part because of the new discoveries of Egyptian treasures such as King Tutankhamen’s tomb (Pollock 58). Freud was not immune to the lure of Ancient Egypt, and “after the death of his father in 1896” he began using his inheritance to purchase “antiquities,” with a specific emphasis on “Pharonic Egypt” (58). Freud’s Egyptophilia manifests itself in the purchase and display of these antiquities, such as “a 1906 gouache by Ernst Koemer of the façade of the Temple at Abu Simbel” which depicts “four monumental effigies of Rameses II,” while simultaneously making an appearance in the examples Freud uses in his essay “The Uncanny” the Egyptian ‘double’ and the story “The Ring of Polycrates” (58, 387, 392). Popular culture throughout the twentieth century has often turned to both popular Egyptomania and also Freud’s concept of the uncanny, with examples of this widespread in horror and science fiction films such as The Mummy (both 1932 and 1999 versions), Stargate, and Raiders of the Lost Ark (63). Griselda Pollock discusses The Mummy (1932 version) and the use that the director makes of the uncanny, specifically the plot points of “forbidden desire and death by order of the Father/Pharaoh,” exposing the presence of both Freudian theory and Egyptomania in the public imagination of the twentieth century (57).
In “The Uncanny” (1919), Freud begins by trying to explain the meaning of the term uncanny, tracing it to the word heimlich, “what is familiar and agreeable” and the word unheimlich, which is “what is concealed and kept out of sight” (370). Freud traces the definitions of heimlich through Grimm’s dictionary until he finds that this word has developed “in the direction of ambivalence until it coincides with its opposite, unheimlich,” and it is at this point where uncanniness comes to exist (377). Two important features of the uncanny are the process of repression and the eventual return from it, and the “factor of involuntary repetition” (399, 390). Aly Berg has a repressed Oedipus complex, which, instead of being resolved in the traditional way, has caused him to retain a sexual desire for his own mother in the absence of his father. This sexual desire is transferred to Judith, the literal mother substitute, who, rather than working to resolve the Oedipus complex, helps to maintain the “wish to get rid of his father in order to take his place with the mother” (Freud, The Ego 32). Throughout Berg, the persistence of uncanny Egyptian imagery signals the uncanny relationship between Aly Berg and Judith. The conditions that cause something to be classified as uncanny vary, including “animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man’s attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex”; and because, in literature, the uncanny is not subject to “reality testing,” Quin can simultaneously use numerous conditions of the uncanny without question (Freud, “The Uncanny” 396, 404). The ordinary housecat can transcend its domestic origins and come to represent the mother figure and in turn Berg’s unresolved Oedipus complex.

Another term closely associated with the uncanny is Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection, from her essay “Powers of Horror” (1980), which “refers to the human reaction akin to an encounter with the uncanny, but markedly different and more violent” (Lodine-Chaffey 206). The idea of the abject as that which “we thrust aside in order to live” reiterates Freud’s idea that the uncanny is that which has gone through the process of repression (Kristeva 3). Much like the concept of the uncanny that exists in an ambivalent location between both unheimlich and heimlich simultaneously, the state of abjection exists “where boundaries between the self and the other break down and cease to exist” (Lodine-Chaffey 207). In her discussion of Freud’s theories on murder and incest Kristeva takes an interest in the “confrontation with the feminine”, which later becomes the other (58). Her reading of Totem and Taboo interprets Freud’s hypothesis that the father “prohibits, separates, [and] prevents contact” between mother and child as an interruption to an idealized “dual relationship” between mother and son (59). The original ontological dependence of the mother-son relationship is found in Berg between Aly Berg and his mother, Edith, and later in the relationship between Berg and Judith, the replacement mother figure. Berg’s pursuit of a sexual relationship with Judith, while planning his father’s murder, can therefore be read as his pursuit of a “soothing dual relationship” (59). Quin also characterizes Aly Berg as an outsider throughout the novel, as a result of the ambiguity in his sexual orientation and the perceived class and racial differences that separate the young Aly Berg and his classmates. This abject state, of both belonging somewhere and at the same time being an outsider, leads to Berg’s rejection by his peers throughout his childhood and adolescence, after already being rejected by his father as a young child.

Early in the novel, Berg describes Judith’s apartment as an “Egyptian tomb, square and dimly lit” that is filled with “taxidermal creatures [staring] from their glass houses” (16). In addition to the taxidermal creatures Judith also owns a live cat, Sebastian, whose presence persists throughout the novel, even after Berg has killed him. Cats were worshipped by Egyptians in the form of the “feline-headed” goddess Bastet, who represents love, sex, and fertility (Leeming), thus establishing a connection between the highly sexualized women in
Berg’s life, Edith and Judith, and the cats in Quin’s novel. The goddess Bastet is directly connected to domesticated cats, small figures of which were “worn as amulets” by the cult of Bastet (britannica.com). Mummified cats filled cemeteries in Bubastis and Memphis, where the cult followings of the goddess were located. Bastet was often depicted as a woman with the head of a cat and wearing “an elaborately ornamented dress” (britannica.com). Just like Bastet, Aly Berg’s dream woman is a “mythical creature,” who is an idealized representation of love and sex, someone like “Ruth, a Helen, Beatrice, Cleopatra” (Quin 67). These women are classical figures who all famously represent the ideal woman in some form, and they are what Aly Berg looks for in his relationship with Judith.

The presence of the cat Sebastian is found throughout Berg in the form of fur imagery. Immediately after killing Sebastian, Aly Berg notices the “bits of fur clinging to [his hands]” (26). Although Berg never mentions the killing of the cat again, the rest of the novel is filled with references to fur, all of which illustrate the “involuntary repetition” that often signals the uncanny (Freud, “The Uncanny” 396). Before Berg returns to his room after killing Judith’s cat, he trips on some steps and describes “something like wet fur [brushing] against his face” (28). Later, Berg enters Judith’s room because she is crying and is “confronted by warmth, smell of wet fur” (48). This olfactory imagery makes us question whether the room actually smells of wet fur or if this smell is in Berg’s imagination. The uncanny presence of wet fur is both indicative of Berg’s guilt as a result of killing the cat, and the fact that he cannot escape his unresolved Oedipus complex.

Berg’s description of Judith in her fur-collared coat equates her to “a cat any minute about to claw his eyes out” (95). By comparing Judith to the ever-present cat, he evokes the ideas of love, sex, and fertility associated with cats. Berg also directly relates Judith to the goddess Bastet by referring to her as a “bitch-goddess” several times (112). When Berg wonders what it “could be like having heavy pendulous pears strung practically round one’s neck, a triangular fur piece, blood every lunar month,” he is again invoking fur imagery in relation to women, and more specifically his mother, Edith (111). The connection between Edith and Judith is strengthened by the Egyptian imagery Berg uses when describing his childhood memories of Edith “listening to a sphinx’s secret, hiding under the pyramidal palaces of her flesh” (112). These images of Edith evoke a comforting, homely feeling that is reminiscent of Kristeva’s idealized relationship between mother and son. The Oedipal nature of Berg and Judith’s relationship, in which Judith acts as a replacement for his mother, causes the imagery associated with both Judith and Edith to be read as uncanny and abject. Instead of resolving his Oedipus complex through a relationship with Judith, Aly Berg’s neurosis is more thoroughly entrenched in his mind because of Judith’s confusing role as pseudo-stepmother. While he simultaneously plots the murder of his father, Nathy Berg, Aly plans to “fuck [Judith] too” (59). The word “too” here is important because this is what Aly Berg says he is going to do in the “meanwhile,” before he can go home to Edith for “a nice get-together,” a statement that implies that more is happening between mother and son than just Christmas dinner (59). Later, Aly Berg considers it his duty “to take his father’s corpse back home to Edith” as a “trophy of his triumphant love for her” (106). This is not just the triumph of Aly’s love for Edith but also the triumph of the son over the father, thus allowing Aly to avoid the risk of castration.

The association of Judith’s room with an Egyptian tomb also reinforces the imagery throughout the novel of embalming and mummification. Often, when Berg is in Judith’s room, he takes note of the “shadows of the stuffed animals, an owl, a mouse, a fox’s mask” (19). The connection between Judith and the taxidermal animals is strengthened when Berg enters her
apartment and sees both the “taxidermal objects piled in the corner” and the body of the yellow bird on the table, leading him to believe his father is the one with the “fetish” (115). The presence of the bird, possibly there to add to the collection of stuffed animals, is noteworthy because Nathy Berg is still away from Brighton at this time, and it must have been Judith who dug the body out of the flowerbed. Later, when Berg crashes through the partition and destroys several of the stuffed animals and wax flowers in Judith’s apartment, her reaction is extremely emotional and Berg describes her as “half blind from rage and tears,” and this reaction gives the impression that Judith has an emotional attachment to the dead animals (142). Nathy Berg does show an interest in taxidermy at the end of the novel, when the landlady reveals that he is getting a budgie stuffed for three quid, but his interest seems to be limited to keeping a pet budgie, and he does not have the expertise in taxidermy to stuff the pet himself (166).

In Freud’s discussion of the uncanny, he uses the example of the Ancient Egyptians’ “art of making images of the dead in some lasting material” (Freud, “The Uncanny” 387). He proposes that this use of the double as an assurance of immortality becomes a “ghastly harbinger of death” (387). The Ancient Egyptians would engage in “the wrapping of wooden tomb statues representing the deceased,” invoking “doubling as a preservation against extinction” (Riggs 138; Freud, “The Uncanny” 387). This uncanny doubling appears in Berg in the form of Nathy Berg’s ventriloquist dummy. This prized dummy doubles for Nathy Berg, even going so far as wearing one of his own suits. Ironically, when Aly Berg believes he has killed his father (but what he mistakes for his father’s corpse is just the dummy wrapped in the eiderdown), the Ancient Egyptians would have believed that he is killing a part of his father and that this act would have been necessary for the eventual destruction of Nathy Berg. Christina Riggs discusses the importance of linen and cotton wrappings in the mumification process, and her research shows that the Egyptians wrapped the deceased, the wooden statues representing them, and the canopic jars in which the “resin-coated remains of the deceased’s inner organs” were kept (139). This important feature of the mumification process is key to Aly Berg’s self-deception; he believes he has finally killed his father because he can only see the outer wrapping of the dummy. He even worries that the body will begin to smell because, although it is wrapped in the eiderdown, he has not “embaled it, like the Egyptians used to,” regretting the fact that he has “no aromatic oils or spices” (105). Aly Berg alsoputs forth the belief that a part of the self can be kept in an object when he writes “NON OMNIS MORIAR” (59) on his mirror; translated from Latin it means, “I shall not wholly die” (Merriam-Webster.com). The use of the mirror is significant; the mirror was important to Egyptians because of the “distinctive characteristic of the mirror’s reflecting surface, which became identified with the individual whose image appears within it” (Riggs 139). Similar to the concept of the dummy as a double and preserver of immortality, the mirror that reflects an image of Berg becomes a part of him and another type of preservation against complete destruction.

The concept of the mirror image is also found in the first sentence of Quin’s novel: “A man called Berg, who changed his name to Greb, came to a seaside town intending to kill his father....” In his Introduction to Berg, Giles Gordon makes the point that this sentence “really tells you all you need to know about the book by way of plot” (ix). Although this is true, the sentence also reveals an important part of Aly Berg’s assumed identity, which is that Greb is the mirror image of Berg. Mirrors present the viewer with a reversed image, revealing that the identity Aly Berg presents is a reversal of his primary identity. This reversal allows Aly Berg to return to the first site of desire, the mother’s body, and so summons into the present what had
previously been kept in the past and seen through flashbacks throughout the novel. Berg, no longer himself, lives as the uncanny double of himself, the reversed image found in a mirror.

As Berg is lying in bed, he imagines he is being “embalmed” and “mummified,” and immediately afterwards he takes note of a strange odor that he detects when Judith enters his room (55). He questions whether it is his hair tonic leaking, but immediately discounts that assumption. The smell is never identified, but it seems to be associated with the chemical smells of his hair tonic and the process of embalming and mummification, thus leading to the assumption that Judith smells of embalming fluid. Berg also comments on his own terrible appearance throughout the novel, describing his neck as “mottled, stork-like,” and noticing that “his whole face seemed to have wrinkled into a dried apricot” (115, 106). These self-descriptions bring to mind images of dried up mummies and dying bodies, images that are abject because of our need to reject death and disease, and lead to the destabilization of the barrier between the living body and the deceased corpse. When Berg reads the letter from Nathy Berg to Judith telling her to stay away from Aly, Berg thinks to himself that he had better leave “if you want to keep your skin” (107). This figure of speech carries more weight when put in perspective with Judith’s predilection for preserved bodies, for it gives the impression that Judith might keep Aly as a preserved specimen if he is not careful. This imagery simultaneously creates an uncanny feeling about Judith and establishes that Aly Berg exists in an abject state.

Aly Berg recognizes his own abject state; even in flashbacks from his childhood he is able to realize that he is different from those around him, whether it is because of the bread Edith purchases from Mr. Dobbs or his homosexual tendencies (137). Berg romanticizes his abject nature, saying “I’m a changeling really, my mother’s an Eastern Queen, and my father’s an Arab Prince, with a palace of gold in the desert and a hundred and one snow-white horses, that one day will belong to me” (137). This intertextual reference to Heathcliff, from Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights, serves to reinforce Berg’s abjection. Like Cathy, who romanticizes Heathcliff’s unknown origins by telling him he is a “prince in disguise,” whose “Father was Emperor of China” and “Mother an Indian queen” (Brontë 58), Aly Berg imagines that he exhibits all the positive qualities of the racially differentiated Gypsies.

Kristeva’s concept of abjection as “the attempted rejection of what appear to be ‘other’ but are in reality parts of the self” is a perfect description of Gypsies, since they exist within European society (Bardi 32). When tracing the history of Gypsies in England, it becomes clear that since “their arrival in the early sixteenth century” they have faced oppression from other more dominant elements of European society (31). Regardless of whether the first Gypsies to arrive in England were actually from Egypt, the English people believed they were Egyptians, and so they held this identity in the imaginations of the public. In 1530 the first laws against ‘Egyptians’ were put into effect, “with punishments including imprisonment, pillorying, enslavement, and deportation” (31). The later 1554 Egyptian Act allowed Gypsies to remain in England, but attacked their way of life and led to racist stereotypes (31). When Emily Brontë wrote Wuthering Heights in 1847, Gypsies were still being systematically harassed, but at the same time “evoked romantic praise” (Behlmer 232). It is this romantic ideal that Aly Berg attempts to invoke about himself, but instead brings forth the centuries of negative stereotypes directed towards Gypsies.

Quin also uses several references to William Shakespeare’s The Tempest throughout Berg to create a subtext that reinforces the relationship between father and son. Ironically, in The Tempest Ferdinand and his father, Alonso, are joyously reunited at the end of the play, while Aly Berg is the one who wishes that he “could only be Prospero” in order to “create a storm” that
would kill his father, Nathy Berg (154). The song that the spirit Ariel sings in Act One, scene two of *The Tempest* helps to convince Ferdinand that his father has perished in the storm. Aly Berg makes reference to Ariel’s song twice in the novel. The first time is when he wishes that he could create a storm as Prospero did and imagines that his father is flung across the sea, saying “those are stones that were his eyes,” an echo of Ariel’s line “Those are pearls that were his eyes” (Quin 154; Shakespeare 1.2.398). After leaving him behind in the sea Aly Berg believes that his father is “full fathoms five,” another phrase from Ariel’s song (Quin 161). These references to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* foreshadow the survival of Nathy Berg and his return to the rooming house at the end of the novel. Although Nathy Berg and Aly Berg switch places it is not the same happy reunion between father and son that Shakespeare imagines between Ferdinand and Alonso. The relationship between them is one that is abject, in that it is both an unfinished and unfinishable affair; just as the processes of the human body never cease – we continue to defecate and urinate all our lives – the struggle between Aly Berg and his father is one that continues on, only becoming more abject as the boundaries between the two men break down.

The Egyptian cat and mummification imagery throughout the novel bring both a sinister and exotic tone to its mundane, depressing events. The uncanny quality associated with Judith’s taxidermal objects and the haunting presence of Sebastian’s wet fur signal that there is something dangerous and otherworldly about Judith. This imagery also casts Aly Berg as abject in nature, and it is both the uncanny and abject imagery throughout *Berg* that exposes the truly frightening extent of Aly Berg’s Oedipus complex.
Bibliography


JENNIFER KOMOROWSKI is currently attending Brescia University College and will be graduating this spring with an Honors Specialization in English and a Major in Sociology. Her research interests are in psychoanalytical theory and critical theory. This fall she will be working on her Master’s in Theory and Criticism at Western University.