



To More Non-Human Matters: Abject, Discard, and Identity Formation in Samuel Beckett's *First Love*

Mohammadreza Zare
Arak University, Arak, Iran

Abstract:

The present article is a rereading of Samuel Beckett's well-known novella *First Love* through a posthuman-ecocritical lens, investigating the role of non-human entities in shaping the narrator's identity in the story and exploring how the characters can be understood as discarded objects. The abundance of non-human materials especially waste objects in Beckett's work necessitates such a reading to shed light on its less explored aspects. This essay relies on the interconnectedness of abject and discards to demonstrate how the narrator's association with discards hits on his devaluated, unstable, and fragmented self; the characteristics mostly associated with modern literary works.

Keywords: Beckett, *First Love*, Abject, Discard, Posthumanism, Ecocriticism.

Introduction

From the Age of Enlightenment to the early 20th century, the concept of humanism emphasized a coherent above-nature human subjectivity through which the outside world was dominated and comprehended. Since the previous century, however, this idea of a coherent self has shattered as human beings' relationship with their environment and other materials changed due to wars and technological advancements. The centrality of humans as autonomous, exploitive rational beings faced significant criticism and placed itself with world views that radically questioned human subjectivity and agency. Following the poststructuralist viewpoints that challenged the notions of identity, ethics, and power in the post-humanist world, in the late 20th century posthumanism emerged as a philosophical critical framework to critique the long-established anthropocentrism. Though defined differently by many scholars in recent years, the

Article History: Received: 30 June 2025. Revised: 03 July 2025. Accepted: 13 July 2025. First published: 1st August 2025.

Copyright: © 2025 by the author/s.

License: Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Published by: Adrija Press, India.

Citation: Zare, M. (2025). To More Non-Human Matters: Abject, Discard, and Identity Formation in Samuel Beckett's *First Love*. *New Literaria: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 6:2. <https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2025.v06i2.014>

common spirit of posthumanism that includes “evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates” (Wolfe, 2010, xvi) “is to relativize or decenter the human by coupling it to some other order of being” (Clark, 2008, p. 2-3). In other words, philosophical posthumanism actively questions what it means to be human in the post-Anthropocene era through “rethinking the conceptual frameworks within which we have defined human subjectivity, agency, identity, and self, acknowledging the permeable boundaries of species in the natural-cultural continuum, and recognizing the profound interconnections between different forms of life in the composite world where previously we had seen separations” (Opperman, 2016, p. 275). Its evolutionary aspect by deviating from the human-centered perspective, considers humans as evolving species that are entangled with other species and ecosystems. It emphasizes that human beings are constantly improving by genetic mutation and environmental interrelations, bringing forward the role of surrounding materials in shaping human identity and existence. With the advent of new cutting edge technologies like AI etc., the technological subdivision of posthumanism furthers this evolutionary perspective into investigating how technological advancements reconfigure the human condition. Newly emerged disciplines in technology have expanded the capacities of the human body and mind by enabling new forms of cognition and communication that go beyond the traditional biological limits. In such an era, human subjectivity is (re)defined by new parameters that requires a lens like posthumanism to address this matter. The ecological element of posthumanism however, creates a firm bond with ecocriticism and environmentalism especially in its ethical concern for nonhuman life forms and its emphasis on interdependence between material entities and human beings. If ecocriticism endeavors to demonstrate “the interconnections between human culture and the material world, between the human and the nonhuman” (Glotsfelty, 1989, p. 4–5), posthuman-ecocriticism extends that inquiry to reconsider the very construction of the human in relation to its surroundings by “re-imagining what it means to be human, or nonhuman, in a world of hybrid configurations, strange natures, and stories” (Opperman, 2016, p. 273). In recent years, this approach has provided a fertile ground for revisiting canonical works of literature, shedding light on the very formation of characters’ identity with regard to their surroundings and living environment. The broad scope of posthumanism has enabled literary scholars to implement many rereadings of modern literary works, depicting how such works indicated and initiated a posthuman condition when such a coherent framework was yet to emerge. Samuel Beckett’s *First Love* as a canonical work or at least of ambiguous canonical status in which the presence of material and non-human substances plays a significant role invites a reconsideration through a posthuman-ecocritical lens.

***First Love*/Abject/Discard**

First written in French in 1946 then translated into English and published by the author in 1973, Samuel Beckett’s *First Love* as a prominent modernist novella has been the subject of scholarly discussion and appraisal for decades¹. It is one of the earliest instances of Beckett’s writings in French and his use of the first point of view narrative. In consistency with some other works of Beckett, *First Love* is a demonstration of abject and disgust, the substantial materials “associated with physical decay and putrefaction” that enable Beckett, as Harold Pinter claims, to portray a “body of beauty” (Ben-Zvi, 2012, p. 681-682). In Ben-Zvi’s (2012) view, by conjoining Beckett’s body of work with the physical body that lies at its center, the body that Pinter sees in Beckett’s writings is not the “classical beauty, whose exterior perfection creates aesthetic pleasure by hiding any hint of its animal nature, but rather a fleshly body shown eating, excreting, copulating, decaying, declining, and dying” (p. 682). The womb-like narrative space of *First Love*² predisposes the presence of abject though in different perspectives. With a more in-depth look one could affirm, that Beckett’s story “begins with the

¹ For more approaches to *First Love* see Ayers (1998), Katz (2003), Peer (1998), Smith (2017), Gourley (2017), and Walton (1988).

² See O’Connell (2021).

premise of a world in which the abject and the beloved already coincide. (Rada, 2015, 180). Variedly interpreted, “abject” and “abjection” have been largely “associated with Kristeva’s version of psychoanalysis, which focuses on the pre-Oedipal phase when the baby is still undifferentiated from its environment and its mother’s body” (Klages, 2012, p. 3). In Kristeva’s account, abjection is that which disgusts us, as it exists on the borders that threaten the construction of our identities. The abject fascinates and repulses us in equal measure, and does not respect borders, position or rules (Kristeva, 1982, p. 68, as cited in O’Connell, 2021, p. 108). The abject substances such as “excrement, blood (especially menstrual blood), and dead bodies” create horror and fear as they recall and remind the time when the individual was in a “non-differentiated state of egolessness” and threaten to dissolve the current unified self and its *coherent identity* (Klages, 2012, p. 3). As defined by Oxford English Dictionary, abject also means: “cast down, downcast, brought low in position, condition, or estate, low-lying, cast off, cast out, and rejected”, giving it the status to be considered not only “in terms of separation on a conceptual level, but also as a state of being, or a position of marginalization” (McCabe-Remmell, 2006, vi- vii). In this light, one could assert that abject can be generally interpreted as “what culture throws away, its garbage, or its waste products” (Klages, 2012, p. 3). The common characteristics of abject and waste/discard³ as something devaluated and thrown away and also as a source of displeasure and disgust, pave the way to a more profound understanding of its functionality and broader implications through Discard Studies because it looks into “how some materials, practices, regions, and people are valued and devalued, become disposable or dominant” (Liboiron & Lepawsky, 2022, p. 3). As Arefin (2015) mentions, though on the one hand studying discard through abject “means being cognizant of the ways in which something beyond meaning (the extra discursive) is continually influential in how we make meaning” the broader socio-political dimension of this relationship considers “how objects, people, and practices are tagged as dirty and subsequently marginalized” (p. 2). In other words, studies in this matter endeavor to demonstrate the role of “garbage, discards, or any kind of material waste” as “mediators of socio-cultural and spatial inclusions, exclusions, and difference” (Arefin, 2015, p. 2), furthering its investigations “beyond material waste, though of course the discipline also necessarily includes those materials” (Liboiron & Lepawsky, 2022, p. 3). The way waste is produced, however, is central to discard studies as it is the generative force that (re)defines these mediations and relationships. As a matter of fact, many aspects of waste including “the social, economic, political, cultural, and material systems that shape waste and wasting” are less commonly known and clearly observed (Liboiron & Lepawsky, 2022, p. 2). For instance, the politics of wasting as “a technique of power” is not limited to discussing “litter, sewage, and trash” but investigates how systems discard “people, places, and things that actually or potentially threaten the continuity of those systems” and starts with the question “What must be discarded for this or that system to be created and to carry on?” (Liboiron & Lepawsky, 2022, p. 3). With a more encompassing observation, it could be said that “the main theories, concepts, and techniques [of] discard studies are able to describe and help interpret instances of value and devaluation, the wasting of some lives and not others [...], dominant structures and how they are maintained or threatened, and how hierarchical categories are formed and do their work” (Liboiron & Lepawsky, 2022, p. 5). In what follows therefore, I rely on Discard Studies as an emerging critical lens in posthumanism and the interconnectedness of abject and discard to explore how the narrator’s identity is shaped through interaction with discards and argues the possibility of considering the characters of the story as discarded objects.

The narrative begins with the episode in which the narrator describes his relationship with his father’s corpse and the cemetery. As a place where corpses are buried, the cemetery resembles a venue in which discards are abundant and the narrator feels enjoyment when being

³ Jens Schneeweiß (2022) in the chapter “The dimensions of refuse: Discard studies as a matter of connectivity” in *Connectivity Matters! Social, Environmental and Cultural Connectivity in Past Societies*, lists the names and expression that are used interchangeably for waste and discard.

in such a place. He enjoys the smell of corpses and takes the air of the cemetery willingly: "Personally I have no bone to pick with graveyards, I take the air there willingly, perhaps more willingly than elsewhere, [...] The smell of corpses, distinctly perceptible under those of grass and humus mingled, I do not find unpleasant" (Beckett, 2000, p. 64-65). Living among the corpses as thrown-away objects is his hobby and source of pleasure, something that he prefers to "public parks and beauty-spots", never gets tired of walking among the graves and reading their inscriptions, and everything tastes better when he is there: "[...] as a place for an outing, when out I must, leave me my graveyards and keep—you—to your public parks and beauty-spots. My sandwich, my banana, taste sweeter when I'm sitting on a tomb [...]" (Beckett, 2000, p. 65). The narrator is vividly drawn by discards, feeling a sense of attachment to them which ultimately shapes his fractured self. His proximity to the graveyard and the corpses is a demonstration of his internal death and retreatment from the living world, treating death not with fear but familiarity through identification with what is discarded and decomposed. In O'Connell's words, "the narrator displays an abjection towards the living but not the dead" (2021, 108), casting down himself by deviating from the so-called "normal" way of living.

The current situation of the narrator as a person living among the dead is the result of his father's death and subsequently his (the narrator's) eviction from the house. His father, during his lifetime, has been supportive and the only one wanting him in the house but at the time of his death, though leaving some amount of money to the narrator, the authoritative powers throw him out of the house like a waste object: "One day, on my return from stool, I found my room locked and my belongings in a heap before the door" (Beckett, 2000, p. 67). He tries to convince the people in charge to stay at the house by working and tending to some matters every day but they refuse, devaluating and treating him similar to something unimportant like garbage. This incident, as the narrator mentions, becomes a reason for constipation at the time of its occurrence and afterward. The broader metaphorical aspect of this constipation is important. It is an undeniable fact that bodily wastes are produced and discarded on a daily basis by human beings and constipation is a challenge that should be overcome in order to have a smooth production of waste. Though in Beckett's story constipation as abject can be linked to "the male neurotic and his failure to resolve the birth repression normally experienced in the pleasurable act of heterosexual sexual gratification" (O'Connell, 2021, 115), Considering writing as a way of excreting in *First Love* (Hillenaar, 1998), the narrator's constipation as a barrier for producing discards can be understood as his inability or difficulty in producing new writings at the time and around his eviction from the house because early in the story he mentions his interest in writing, reciting some lines of his writings to the reader.

The next episode follows the introduction of Lulu; the woman whom the narrator feels an affection towards. He meets Lulu on a bench near a canal, presumably outside the urban area, a place not sufficiently suitable to start a love affair. The narrator finds the bench "well situated [...] backed by a mound of solid earth and garbage" (Beckett, 2000, p. 69), showcasing his satisfaction with the discards surrounding him and his affair. In a sense, the bench is located in a marginalized area and its place is consistent with the situation of its two visitors: the narrator and Lulu. As Arefin (2015) notes, "populations can be marked as abject through their metonymic, metaphorical or other symbolic associations with dirt or filth" such as "the poor, sex workers, queer populations; ethnic, religious or racial minorities" (p. 3). Near the end of the story, the reader comes to understand that Lulu is a prostitute, a profession associated with abject, positioning her as someone discarded and marginalized similar to the narrator. Both characters are society's waste objects, discarded by the authoritative powers to keep the system clean and functioning. The bench, therefore, becomes a venue for the discarded and marginalized. The relationship that initiates between the narrator and Lulu on the bench is to a certain extent ambiguous, being something between affection, disturbance, and disinterestedness. The place of its formation, however, an outlying bench backed by garbage, foreshadows its fractured sense of love and its devaluation. Their interaction results in the

narrator leaving the bench after numerous meetings because “the site no longer answered [*his*] requirements” (Beckett, 2000, p. 72). He then chooses a deserted cowshed as his residence and it is at this “byre, littered with dry and hollow cowclaps subsiding with a sigh at the poke of [*his*] finger” (Beckett, 2000, p. 73) that for the first time in his life he encounters and experiences a feeling assumed to be love. Similar to his earlier residences, the cemetery and the bench backed by garbage, taking refuge in the cowshed full of discards indicates his devaluation of status and identity as he chooses a place to stay that originally was meant for animals. This act, in consistency with earlier elaborations, portrays him as a waste object belonging to a marginalized place for disposable materials. The feeling of love that has been shadowing him since his refuge in the cowshed makes him inscribe “the letters of Lulu in an old heifer pat or flat” (Beckett, 2000, p. 73). It is clear that the identification of Lulu with excrement gives her the status of garbage and becomes evident that “the narrator wishes to expel Lulu from himself like a waste object” (Rada, 2015, 183). This eradicates a veil from his ambiguous relationship with Lulu, showing his simultaneous mixed feelings of attachment and detachment. The narrator questions the nature of his love, measuring it with platonic love standards for instance, and asks the reader: “Would I have been tracing her name in old cowshit if my love had been pure and disinterested?” (Beckett, 2000, p. 74). He does not believe his affection towards Lulu is platonic but the important thing is the value of the cowshit to the narrator as he sees writing the name of his love on such a thing as a sign of interest. This indicates the low position of love in his view and the lesser value of Lulu as the subject of this romantic affair to be associated with dirt.

The final episode of the story revolves around the narrator’s inhabitancy in Lulu’s house. In his early entrance to her house, he is not yet aware of Lulu’s profession as a prostitute. He tries to have things organized and asks for a chamber pot to use as a toilet in bed after considering “to relieve oneself in bed is enjoyable at the time, but soon a source of discomfort” (Beckett, 2000, p. 80). The narrator, just like a small child, does not have any problem with extracting his bodily wastes on his bed and as a matter of fact, enjoys doing such a thing. Being twenty-five years old, earning pleasure from discarding bodily wastes in bed is a demonstration of his undifferentiated status with the womb and subsequently his fractured identity as a unified self. In a sense, he does not repel the abject rather, feels a closeness to them. It is not a source of disgust for him to pee or shit in his pants, reversely, it is pleasurable. He gets a stewpan instead of a chamber pot which after settling down in the house, the pot is emptied by Lulu once a day. In parallel to earlier images of Lulu, this gives us a more profound idea of her as a discard as she is only good for prostitution and disposing of the narrator’s bodily wastes. Her house is a two-conjoined room by a kitchen and on each door of the rooms, she installs some old hangings found in family junks. This could be interpreted as a sign indicating the presence of discards and garbage in both rooms, reinforcing the status of both characters as discarded and marginalized people who have been put away by others. The last part of this episode is where Lulu reveals his pregnancy and informs the narrator that he is the father. Upon hearing the news, being dizzy and confused, the narrator runs away from Lulu’s house, scrabbling through a mass of junk at the door that has barred his way. He discards the baby and treats him/her as a waste object by first ordering the mother to “Abort” the unborn and then running away from it. Lulu and her baby are discarded by the narrator, showcasing him as a person afraid, fragile, and unable to take responsibility.

Conclusion

Through this reconsideration of non-human entities in Beckett’s *First Love* through a posthuman-ecocritical view that included the study of discards and waste objects, we came to have a more profound look into the role of these matters and the status of the characters as being discarded and marginalized. Beckett’s story shows a posthuman condition in which non-human material are essential for the formation of identity and imposes value and devaluation

on presented subjects. The narrator's self is to a large extent shaped by interacting with discards, becoming a demonstration of a fragmented, devaluated human being who has been discarded by others. The story is not about being discarded but is also a depiction of how the narrator discards others (other living people, Lulu, and the unborn baby). The narrator's fragmented and unstable identity through association with discards is in parallel with the notion of human subjectivity in modern literary works, depicting how Beckett portrayed a posthuman image before its historical inception.

References

- Arefin, M. R. (2015). *Abjection: A definition for discard studies* [Blog post]. Discard Studies: Social studies of waste, pollution & externalities. <https://discardstudies.com/2015/02/27/abjection-a-definition-for-discard-studies/>
- Beckett, S. (2000). *First love and other novellas*. Penguin.
- Ben-Zvi, L. (2011). Beckett and disgust: The body as “laughing matter.” *Modernism/modernity*, 18(4), 681–698. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2011.0092>
- Clarke, B. (2008). *Posthuman metamorphosis: Narrative and systems*. Fordham University Press.
- Glotfelty, C. B. (1989). *Toward an ecological literary criticism* [Conference presentation]. Annual Meeting of the Western Literature Association, Coeur d’Alene, ID, United States.
- Hillenaar, H. (1998). A psychoanalytical approach to Beckett's “*First Love*.” *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 7(1), 419–438. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18757405-90000111>
- Klages, M. (2012). *Key terms in literary theory*. Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection* (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press.
- Liboiron, M., & Lepawsky, J. (2022). *Discard studies: Wasting, systems, and power*. The MIT Press.
- McCabe-Remmell, P. A. (2006). *Joyce...Beckett...Dedalus...Molloy: A study in abjection and masochism* (Master's thesis, University of South Florida).
- O’Connell, B. (2021). Insufferable maternity and motherhood in “*First Love*”. In W. Davies & H. Bailey (Eds.), *Beckett and politics* (pp. 107–121). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Oppermann, S. (2016). 14. From material to posthuman ecocriticism: Hybridity, stories, natures. In H. Zapf (Ed.), *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology* (pp. 273–294). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110314595-016>
- Rada, M. (2015). “Dread name of love”: The perverse aesthetics of enjoyment as disgust in Barnes and Beckett. *The Comparatist*, 39, 171–195. <https://doi.org/10.1353/com.2015.0027>
- Wolfe, C. (2010). *What is posthumanism?* University of Minnesota Press.

Bio-note

Email Id: mrz.academic@gmail.com

Orchid ID:

