“Disappointing Duality: The Unfulfilled Potential for Total Empowerment in Are You There, God? It’s Me, Margaret.”

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Judy Blume’s 1970 classic Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret. stands the test of time because it presents a straightforward narrative and provides a private sphere in which young readers can confront public problems. At the heart of the novel is the exploration of a pre-teen’s emotions while anticipating the arrival of her first period. A second problem, religious identity, further complicates the narrative, fueling a year-long quest for religion. While these two problems figure centrally in the lives of many adolescent girls, they are actually different avenues of addressing the larger problem dealt with during adolescence: the search for identity. For Margaret and her readership, this means feminine identity and spiritual identity. Adolescence is the time in which we negotiate our ways from childhood to adulthood. Motivating Margaret, and adolescents in general, is a desire to “fit in,” to conform. Their motivations can also be framed though the desire to reject abjection. While the novel empowers girls through the rejection of abjection by bringing menstruation into an acceptable and public sphere, Margaret’s need to have a formal religious identity, rather than her own personal relationship with god, compromises the book’s power to inform secure and confident identities for Margaret and readers.

Before addressing Margaret directly, however, it is important to briefly discuss abjection and its importance in young adult literature. According to Karen Coats, “abjection means to operate at the social rim.” For her, “socially abject figures are those who cannot seem to manage either the material conditions and habits or the identifications necessary to sustain a position in a social group” (290). Most of her exploration of abjection and young adult literature focuses on how abjection can lead to violence. Margaret never faces scenarios of social abjection as extreme as those explored by Coats—in general she positions herself well in her new suburban setting—nor would she
ever follow a course as drastic as the individuals motivating Coats’s article. But her
discussion of how abjection in young adult literature informs the lives of young adult
readers has particular pertinence in this discussion.

Margaret’s underlying fear of social abjection can be seen before either of the
novel’s two main problems, religion and menstruation, absorb her life. On the first day of
school, Margaret opts to not wear socks in accord with the command levied by Nancy,
her Alpha Female of a peer down the block. “Oh, listen, Margaret. On the first day of
school wear loafers, but no socks. […] Otherwise you’ll look like a baby. […] Besides, I
want you to join my secret club and if you’re wearing socks the other kids might not want
you” (Blume 13). Nancy’s insistence to act this way overrides Margaret’s knowledge
that her feet will hurt and her mother’s advice against the flawed style decision. We see
already the pressure Margaret puts upon herself to fit in.

The origins of Coats’s work on social abjection also bear weight on Margaret’s
story. Previously applied to social position, abjection was considered “the process of
expulsion that enables the subject to set up clear boundaries and establish a stable
identity.” In Western culture, this concept engendered feelings of disgust, shame, and
dirtiness associated with “products of elimination,” including menstrual blood (291).
Thus we see that abjection from the body informs abjection from society. Menstruation
is an unavoidable biological process all women begin at puberty. For centuries, social
constructs have forced this aspect of womanhood into the private sphere and in the
process disempowered women by bringing shame to this natural cycle.

Menstrual shame exemplifies the idea of identity politics in young adult literature
as put forth by Roberta Seelinger Trites: “Identity politics are a social construction. That
is, they are defined by discourse, not biology” (46). Having discussed gender, race, and
class, she writes,

These concepts serve as institutions because the behaviors of large numbers
of people are regulated in terms of identity politics. And whether people
self-select the characteristics associated with a group or whether those characteristics are imposed on them by the perception of others, their sense of affiliation with a group serves in some way as a limiting factor. (47)

The menstrual education films/videos common in schools present one instance in which the approach of menarche and womanhood informs limits on developing girls. Having analyzed one such film from 1947, *The Story of Menstruation* sponsored by Kimberly-Clark, Michelle Martin points out the film’s repeated emphasis on hygiene during menstruation may lead viewers to believe there is “something intrinsically dirty about menstruation in spite of the film’s vociferous denial of the fact” (23). Only a minor explication would bring girls to feel shame concerning menstruation, limiting their growth into womanhood.

Blume’s purpose in writing *Margaret*, then, responds to the social treatment of menstruation, with the intention of removing the limits and abjection that society places on girls at the cusp of puberty. Rather than casting menstruation as a shameful and private experience, she brings the subject into the public sphere and, by rewriting the characteristics imposed on menstruation, empowers girls. *Margaret* is successful and relevant because this process occurs both for the protagonist and her friends in the novel, as well as for readers, who have the ability to experience empowerment and encounter a reshaped public discourse of menstruation through the characters.

Although Margaret joins a secret club, dubbed the Pre-Teen Sensations (PTS’s), to avoid social abjection, the group in turn provides a public space in which Margaret and her three friends gather to discuss crushes, gossip, and—most importantly—together confront the onset of puberty. Each girl gets to create a rule. As a result, they must wear bras, share when they get their first period, keep a list of the cutest boys, and meet once a week. With the first three rules they confront puberty together and provide support for one another—particularly in the stipulation concerning menarche: they must describe the experience, “Especially how it feels” (Blume 33). The fourth, while less exciting, plays an important
role in bringing a sense of normalcy in their meetings. Each session they can address the other rules, and thus menarche does not become an isolating experience, but rather communal.

Martin found particular value in the girls’ discussions in comparison to the disempowering menstrual education films.

These characters consider the biological facts of puberty relevant, but it is clear that a large part of Blume’s agenda for this book is for Margaret and her friends to create alternatives to ‘official’ menstrual education. They all want to know about their bodies, but since they place a higher value on the experiential aspects of menstruation – which the films lack – than on the scientific, technical information about it [they reject the school’s film and its approach]. (Martin 25)

Together they confront their fears and search for answers concerning their biological development. Their cooperation helps to lessen their anxiety over the eventual arrival of menarche and in the process, through the novel, give readers their own “alternative” education. Significantly, Blume even includes a parody of menstrual educational films that the girls watch in class: What Every Girl Should Know. The film “plays an important role in the novel as much for what it attempts to accomplish as for what it fails to do” (24). They dismiss this form through mocking both it and its presenter, a representative from a sanitary napkin company, and by boycotting the company for its consumer manipulation. The girls’ discussions also help the reader (and themselves) by voicing multiple feelings concerning menstruation. Thus, the reader sees diversity in the experiences and emotions of the PTS’s and has a greater likelihood of identifying with one, if not all, for all girls do not confront menarche in the same manner (25).

Margaret’s narration also involves the reader in the novel. Sommers points out that when Margaret finds herself confronted with things she can’t verbally express, she discusses them with the reader. Blume wrote with this intent, reflected in the overall weakness of her plot. She concerns herself more with forming a connection with the reader over the problems anchoring the novel. The reader can thus escape reality while reading but still relate to Margaret’s troubles. “The effect is that the young women
reading Blume’s work feel, in many ways, as if they are active participants in the protagonist’s healing process as much as vice versa” (Sommers 270).

The novel ends with Margaret’s first period. Because she has prepared herself for the event both materially and mentally, she celebrates the moment when it begins physically. “Then I looked down at my underpants and I couldn’t believe it. There was blood on them. Not a lot—but enough.” After she calls for her mother, she begins to laugh and cry at the same time. “My period. I’ve got my period!” she shouts. Margaret boasts to her mother that she knows how to install “the equipment” and has been practicing for two months. One of her first thoughts is to call the other PTSs and share the news. Her narration to the reader ends with pride: “Now I am almost a woman!” Margaret’s experience with menarche shows how girls should eschew the abjection of menstruation as society dictates and instead redefine its identity politics around empowering characteristics rather than limiting ones. She has come to embody and accept her feminine identity with assurance and ease. In doing so, Blume has also given her readers a new blueprint for understanding menarche as a means of feminine empowerment. Menstrual education no longer strictly inhabits sterile classrooms, the privacy of the bathroom, and impersonal texts. With Margaret as a guide, alternative menstrual education travels from the young adult section in bookstores to wherever girls read and converse with friends.

This process of reclamation, in fact, follows Coats’s third prescription for ending social abjection. She writes that emergence from abjections involves “recasting the terms of abjection and leaning instead to bear the abject rather than ignore or dissolve into it” (299). Not only does Margaret do just this in the novel, but with its publication Blume helped to expose the flaws and limitations of traditional menstrual education and discourse. The novel remains in print today in part because of its ability to communicate to young female readers that menstruation is a natural part of life which should be celebrated and shared for its role in fostering a positive feminine identity.
However, when considering the novel as a whole for its ability to reject abjection and encourage the development of positive identities, *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret.* falls short. The second problem central to the novel, religion and religious identity, emerges for Margaret during the first PTS gathering. While the girls work to find a day they can meet each week, they discover they must work around time commitments at Hebrew and Sunday schools. Margaret’s admission that she is “not any religion” shocks and intrigues her friends, spurring more questions.

“But if you aren’t any religion, how are you going to know if you should join the Y or the Jewish Community Center?” Janie asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I never thought about it. Maybe we won’t join either one.”

“But everybody belongs to one or the other,” Nancy said.

With Nancy’s declaration, Margaret squirms to change the subject, uncomfortable with the insinuation that one must belong to a religion in order to be normal. Though not a problem when she lived in New York, the new cultural setting in which she finds herself forces Margaret to question her identity in terms of the social norms of her new community.

Historically, religious abjection has been understood as the exclusion of non-members from a particular religion (Coats). Margaret’s peers and greater society have come to see religious diversity as socially acceptable. While this shows growth from the tendency to discriminate on the basis of denominational differences, it still places a boundary between those who follow a traditional, organized religion and those who either do not believe in God or choose to practice a more personal form of religion—one divorced from the rituals and dogmas of a certain religious institution. To frame this following Trites’s idea of identity politics, Margaret’s peers find unity as a group through the characteristics of going to a religious institution and following an identifiable official religion. The lack of freedom for personal constructions of religion, or more broadly, either a relationship with God or general spirituality (or lack thereof), then becomes the limiting factor within this social construct of identity politics. As we will see, Margaret’s
attempts to normalize disrupt previously held comfort within her religious self, and lead to anxiety and confusion as she attempts to redefine herself by accruing a socially acceptable religious identity.

Margaret uses a year-long school project to focus and structure her search for religion. She frames the project as filling a void in her life, assuming the abjection forced upon her by her peers. Ironically, she discusses the idea of this project with her personal God: “I think it’s time for me to decide what to be. I can’t go on being nothing forever, can I?” (53). The problem of religion arises because Margaret follows the conception of spiritual lifestyle as defined by her peers. Rather than holding on to the identity she has had for her whole life without dilemma, Margaret focuses on what she lacks: a recognizable name for her beliefs.

The project takes Margaret into a variety of religious institutions. She follows her paternal grandmother to her synagogue to celebrate Rosh Hashanah. She joins her PTS friend Janie’s family as they attend their Presbyterian church one Sunday morning. On Christmas Eve, another PTS, Nancy, invites Margaret to come along as her family attends the service at their United Methodist church. She even follows a classmate into a Catholic Church and ends up in confession, only to flee soon after entering. In each experience Margaret remarks to some extent that while this or that aspect may be interesting, she did not feel God’s presence. For this Margaret feels shame and a sense of personal failure.

Margaret’s anxiety over her lack of institutionalized religious identification takes a toll on her life and sense of self. Upon returning home from the Christmas Eve service, she says to her God, “I’m more confused than ever. I’m trying hard to understand but I wish you’d help me a little. If only you could give me a hint God. Which religion should I be? Sometimes I wish I’d been born one way or the other” (94). Margaret frets over the pressure she feels to have a religion and, because of the discomfort in such feelings, puts more pressure on herself to not be an outcast. What’s more, the desire to be “normal” has become so drastic that she has even begun to regret her upbringing and is blind to the
value inherent within her personal relationship with God.

One of the most dramatic scenes in the novel comes with the unexpected arrival of Margaret’s deeply religious maternal grandparents. Her mother had severed connection with them upon marrying Margaret’s father, a Jew. Margaret’s parents contentedly live without religion and have raised her according to their beliefs. When the dinner discussion broaches this point of contention, Margaret immediately desires to leave the dinner table. As her grandparents and parents erupt in a yelling match over the proper construction of Margaret’s religious identity, she idles silently until she can no longer control herself: “Stop it!” I hollered, jumping up. ‘All of you! Just stop it! I can’t stand another minute of listening to you. Who needs religion? Who! Not me…I don’t need it. I don’t even need God!’” (134). Away from everyone in her room, Margaret resolves to never speak with God again. Though in this scene she does reject the societal and personal pressures to conform through acceptable constructions of religious identity, and ostensibly accepts her abjection, this is not an empowering moment. Margaret has not only disregarded the imposed need for a religion—which indeed could be a significant revelation in the novel—but has also dismissed her personal God, who has been a source of comfort and authentic religious identity for her. This moment presents the climax of Margaret’s anxiety and confusion, rather than a resolution of her abjection.

Blume’s failure to grant Margaret a rejection of religious abjection, unlike her treatment of menstrual abjection, ultimately weakens the novel’s potential for empowerment. Much like the climax, Margaret ends with an ambiguity concerning religious identity and abjection. Margaret comes close to recasting the terms of her abjection, but she never fully reconciles the contradiction between societal identity politics and personal beliefs. Near the end of the school year Margaret must hand in a report on her year-long project about her search for religion. Rather than turning in a “thick booklet with a decorated cover” as the other students have, Margaret simply writes her teacher a letter. Even without reading the content of the letter, the contrast in
presentation serves as a physical manifestation of Margaret’s separation from her peers, her continued abjection (143).

Certainly, parts of the letter hold hope for Margaret’s rejection of religious abjection and subsequent potential for empowerment. In her second sentence she writes “I have not come to any conclusions about what religion I want to be when I grow up—if I want to be any special religion at all” (142). Here she addresses the possibility of living life without religion and does not appear to be anxious or shameful in her consideration. Later in the letter she continues to confront the unhappiness that has plagued her during her search. “I have not really enjoyed my religious experiments very much and I don’t think I’ll make up my mind one way or the other for a long time. I don’t think a person can decide to be a certain religion just like that” (142-143). Again, we see a new sense of maturity and confidence in Margaret’s assessment. She seems to have rejected the pressure of knowing if she should go to the Y or to the JCC.

Yet she ends the letter by undercutting the logic behind what progress she did make. “If I should ever have children I will tell them what religion they are so they can start learning about it at an early age. Twelve is very late to learn” (143). Margaret’s closing sentiment continues to follow the construction of religious identity that casts her as an abject figure. In essence, Margaret says that the pain of abjection burdened her so much that, rather than recast the social construct of religious identity and find empowerment in her own personal beliefs, as she did so well with menstruation, she will instead raise her children following the established societal standards of practice. Because Margaret cannot handle the freedom of belief available outside of organized religion, she instead opts to place her hypothetical children in the same limiting construct which so troubled her.

Why, when Blume empowers Margaret and the reader though her reconstruction of menstruation, does she fail in regard to Margaret’s problem of religious identity? While Blume’s literary intent cannot be known, a comparison between Margaret’s
struggle with menstruation and her simultaneous struggle with religion reveals that the elements which empowered her in the former are absent in the latter. Margaret, of course, does not have to become self-actualized at the age of twelve in a novel of just 149 pages. Yet as a problem novel in which Blume has consciously placed these two problems in the life of her protagonist with the intent of conquering them and subsequently having a greater sense of identity, Margaret’s inability to fully discard the social abjection of religious belief outside of organized religion compromises the significance and empowerment of the novel.

Margaret faces her religious search alone. No other character can relate to her feelings of abjection nor the anxiety and shame that it engenders as she begins her religious exploration. Where in the case of menstruation she had the comfort of the PTS’s, now she is on the outside, as they all follow the traditional religious practices of their parents. In addition, her parents are secure (almost dogmatically) in their atheism. She even admits early on that “they’d think I was some kind of religious fanatic or something” if they knew of her internal conversations with God (14). As such, where Blume presented both Margaret and the reader with multiple perspectives on the approach of menarche, here only Margaret can speculate on the pressures and possibilities of religious conformity and identity.

Furthermore, where Blume worked to provide girls with an alternative menstrual education, either with the PTS’s for the novel’s characters or with the novel itself for readers, she shies away from fully endorsing alternative religious practices. Margaret’s parents are the only examples of atheists in the novel. This proves problematic in a book for young adults, as desire to distance oneself from one’s parents often characterizes central conflicts during adolescence. As such, Margaret fails to consider seriously her parent’s motivations concerning religion not necessarily because of what they are, but simply because of who holds them. How would Margaret’s course of action be different had she been confronted with a peer who either identified as atheist or possessed a
relationship with God outside of an established religious organization? I suspect that, had Margaret’s own upbringing been reflected in the mirror of a peer’s habits, it would have led not to self-doubt and feelings of alienation, but to a feeling that she too was OK in her habits and up-brining.

Laughter and parody give ease to the PTS’s rejection of traditional menstrual education and standard societal abjection of menstruation. At first, it seems as if this process will similarly empower Margaret concerning religion. After attending her grandmother’s synagogue, at which she “expected something more…A feeling, maybe,” her father inquires as to what she learned (59).

“Well,” I said. “In the first five rows there were eight brown hats and six black ones.”

My father laughed. “When I was a kid I used to count feathers on hats.” Then we laughed together. (61)

Here Margaret’s boredom and lack of connection to anything spiritual brings her together with her father in rejection of the practice of attending synagogue. Following this moment, Margaret feels empowered and confident in her examination of religious identity, though still operating in the limitations of the social construct of organized religion. Later, she no longer laughs at the disconnect she feels at each religious center and both shame and anxiety assume larger roles in her search.

Margaret’s proud reaction to the arrival of her period and subsequent entrance into womanhood are the definitive elements empowering her to fully reject a traditional treatment of menstruation. She exclaims its arrival to her mother and looks forward to informing her friends. No such feeling accompanies Margaret’s concluding thoughts on religion. She does not discuss her thoughts with her family or friends. More so, she sheepishly turns in her poor excuse for a final project to her teacher, Mr. Benedict. “‘I really tried, Mr. Benedict. I’m—I’m sorry. I wanted to do better.’ I knew I was going to cry. I couldn’t say anything else. So I ran out of the classroom” (144). Margaret seeks asylum in the Girls’ Restroom and ignores Mr. Benedict’s attempts to talk more with her.

All is not lost in the end for Margaret’s trouble concerning her religious identity.
After banning herself from talking with God, and then longing to speak with him once again, she resume her personal relationship with him at the end. Although she still has not completely realized the limitations within organized religion, Margaret at least finds peace enough to reassume her personal spirituality.

While this partial growth brings Margaret comfort, it proves more problematic when considering the impact of the novel on readers. It is likely that one reason Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret. has continued to be reprinted for forty years concerns the empowerment in feminine identity readers find in reading Margaret’s mirrored empowerment. Blume neglected to give readers an equally empowering reinterpretation of religious identity. Even though she expanded the spaces acceptable for menstrual discussion, her failure to remove God and spirituality from hierarchical organizations, and allow the reader to dictate their religious beliefs (or lack thereof), is a missed opportunity, as she only goes as far as Margaret’s conflicted mind. The ambiguity in the conclusion of Margaret’s year-long religious search compromises the empowerment she may garner from her religious identity. Thus, on a whole, we see both Margaret and her readers as reductions of their potential, fully empowered selves.
Works Cited


