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The Vices and Virtues in the Evolution of the Grotesque from Medieval to Modern Literature

David Arnold Hambright

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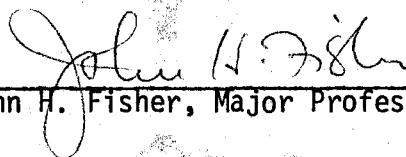Accepted for the Council:

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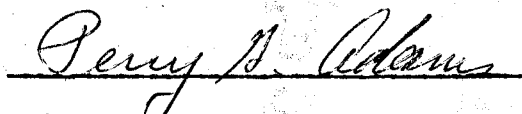
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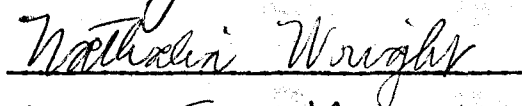
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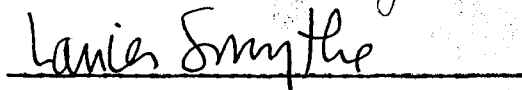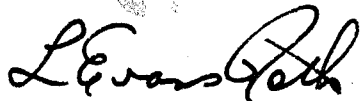
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THE VICES AND VIRTUES IN THE EVOLUTION OF THE GROTESQUE

FROM MEDIEVAL TO MODERN LITERATURE

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

David Arnold Hambright

December 1977

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ABSTRACT

The grotesque, which some critics believe to be the dominant mode
of expression in twentieth-century literature, is not a strictly modern
phenomenon. By concentrating on the literary evolution of the most
grotesque of medieval dramatic figures--the Vice of the morality plays--
I demonstrate in three major chapters the continuity of the grotesque
tradition from its beginnings in the Middle Ages to its uses in the works
of several modern writers.

I define the grotesque as follows: *The grotesque, through the
conflicting tendencies of the humorous and the terrifying, embodies the
negation of a preconceived norm implied within a particular work*. The
first part of the definition is in general agreement with most theorists
of the phenomenon, who note its characteristic conflict. The second part
shifts the discussion away from the exact nature of the grotesque, which
is obscured by much critical controversy, and allows us to focus on its
thematic significance, which may be treated more concisely.

The grotesque grew out of the complex consciousness of medieval
man, whose mind was split between the ideal and the real. By typo-
logically adapting classical and Hebrew ideas, the Fathers of the
Christian Church pictured an ideal world of rational, hierarchical order.
This order was reflected in their fundamentally didactic aesthetics,
which associated Good with harmony and beauty and Evil with ugliness and
discord. But no such order was evident in medieval society, which was
characterized by superstition, violence, and reckless enthusiasm. Caught
between these conflicting forces, the artists were innately unable to

characterize Evil--which led to certain damnation but which seemed so attractive in everyday life--in purely negative terms. The result was the ambivalence which we call the grotesque, and which pervades medieval art and literature in the form of gargoyles, half-human figures in manuscript illumination, and allegorical personifications of Vice in literature. Though the effect is ambivalent, the thematic function of these figures is clear: The grotesque embodies evil and is used as an exhortation to virtue in an attempt to insure salvation. I call this function "traditional" and use it as a standard against which to measure later, more complex, uses of the grotesque.

Although the concerns of many twentieth-century writers have shifted from the religious concerns of Good and Evil to a more general regard for life adjustment without reference to any particular creed, there is still a strong tendency to associate grotesquerie with spiritual moral, or psychological error. This technique is seen in the works of William Faulkner. Some of today's writers, however, effect an inversion of the tradition by endowing their obviously grotesque characters with qualities which are superior to those manifested in the "normal" world around them. This technique is used in varying degrees and modes by Flannery O'Connor, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Peter Shaffer, and Samuel Beckett.

Grotesquerie in both the traditional and inverted senses is evident in the literature written between the Middle Ages and the twentie century. Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and Dickens are traditional in using the grotesque to embody a negation of right living, while Shakespeare, Swift, and Mary Shelley are more modern in their uses of profoundly ambiguous inversions.

I conclude that the grotesque is not a modern phenomenon; it is a persistent, prominent, and potent element in our literary heritage.

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EPIGRAPH

Humanity does not pass through
phases as a train passes through
stations: being alive, it has
the privilege of always moving
yet never leaving anything behind.
Whatever we have been, in some
sort we still are.
                    C. S. Lewis
                    The Allegory of Love

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CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

> It is better to adopt the simplest explanation,
> even if it is not simple, even if it does not
> explain very much. A bright light is not nec-
> essary, a taper is all one needs . . . if it
> faithfully burns.
> <div align="right">Samuel Beckett
Malone Dies</div>

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* ends with a very

suggestive scene. Each Sunday, Benjy Compson, with a vacant smile and

a single flower, is taken for a carriage ride to the family cemetery.

The driver is always T. P.--a Negro servant--and the route is always

the same--they go from the Compson home to the town square of Jefferson,

pass to the right of the statue of the Confederate soldier, and on to

the cemetery. Easter Sunday, April 28, 1928, is, however, different in

several ways. T. P. does not arrive in time to take the drive, and he

is replaced by Luster, Benjy's often perverse and mischievous keeper-

companion. In addition, most of the Compson flowers have been picked to

decorate the Negro church for Easter services, and all that remains for

Benjy is a tattered narcissus with a broken stem. Heady with the excite-

ment of driving the carriage unassisted for the first time, Luster tries

to impress a group of his peers by taking a new route around the town

square--he passes to the left of the Confederate statue. Benjy's

reaction to this deviation from the standard course is severe: "Bellow

on bellow, his voice mounted, with scarce interval for breath. There

was more than astonishment in it, it was horror; shock; agony eyeless,

tongueless, just sound . . . ."[1] The horror subsides only when Benjy's

otherwise demonic brother Jason reverses the direction of the carriage

and allows it to pass, as usual, to the right of the statue:

> The broken flower drooped over Benjy's fist and his eyes were
> empty and blue and serene again as cornice and facade flowed
> smoothly once more from left to right; post and tree, window
> and doorway, and signboard, each in its ordered place.[2]

Benjy's problem is temporary disorientation. His normal world

has been slightly rearranged, his perspective unexpectedly altered, and

he is unable to adapt to his new situation. All he can do is bellow.

Although there is much, both physically and mentally, that is abnormal

about Benjy, we sense that in this scene he embodies something universal,

for we all experience occasional disorientation of varying intensity.

Our world grows suddenly alien--our flower stems break, our statues stare

at us from a different angle, and there is an instant in which our means

of adaptation are ineffective and our responses inarticulate. Nor is

there always a Jason to reverse the direction of the carriage and bring

our world back into its proper perspective. We must do it ourselves, and

in the process we increase our awareness of ourselves and of the world

which we inhabit.

In art, disorientation of the type experienced by Benjy is central

to the effect known as the "grotesque." Like real-life Lusters, modern

writers delight in confronting their readers with the normal world gone

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[1] William Faulkner, *The Sound and The Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*
(1929; rpt. New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1946), p. 335.
Hereafter *Sound* or *Dying*.

[2] Faulkner, *Sound*, p. 336.

awry, with what Wolfgang Kayser calls "the estranged World,"[3] whether the estrangement takes the form of physically or psychologically aberrant characters or of situations in which accepted human norms are surprisingly inverted. A striking example of an abnormal character is Benjy himself-- he is a thirty-three-year-old castrated idiot who cannot speak and who has no comprehension of the meaning of time. In *The Hamlet* Faulkner creates an equally unusual character in Ike Snopes, a moronic child whose greatest love, both spiritually and sexually, is directed toward a cow. Flannery O'Connor parades before us a series of Christ-figures gone mad, moral and physical cripples trapped by narrowness and prejudice and condemned to lives of mediocrity and frustrated dreams. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., creates psychological grotesques whose values render them incapable of functioning normally in the fallen world which they inhabit. In *Equus* Peter Shaffer plumbs the depths of the insane mind of Alan Strang, who blinds six horses in a tortured struggle between love and hate. Samuel Beckett, that master of the unusual, displays perhaps the strangest set of characters ever created--men whose bodies are deteriorated to the point of virtual nonexistence and whose minds, thrashing about for some kind of solid foundation upon which to construct meaningful thoughts, are lost in a chaotic world of seemingly unrelated phenomena. This list of distorted, estranging characters in modern literature could be expanded many times over; in fact, examples are so abundant that at least one critic, Frances Barasch, has called the grotesque "the single most

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[3]Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1963), p. 184.

characteristic expression of our time."[4]

This abundance of grotesquerie has led some critics to see the grotesque as a peculiarly modern phenomenon. William Van O'Connor, for example, says that

> the grotesque has developed in response to our own age, to atom bombs and great social changes. The century just before ours learned that man evolved from a lower biological species, and certain of its philosophers stressed both the irrationality of human nature and the ways in which our actions are determined by forces beyond our control.[5]

Although, as we shall see later in this study, comtemporary social, psychological, and philosophical forces have undoubtedly exercised considerable influence upon our modern writers, to see the origin of the grotesque in such relatively recent movements as Darwinism, Freudianism, Existentialism, or the development of nuclear energy is simplistic and a-historical. Such an explanation cuts modern literature off from the great literary tradition, leaving it adrift in the chaos of a world with no past to give it meaningful form. T. S. Eliot taught us better long ago. In his classic essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot shows that great works of art, by partaking of all the works which preceded them, transcend both the mind which produced them and the age in which they were produced and that to be fully understood a work must be placed in its proper perspective in relation to this tradition:

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[4]Thomas Wright, *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art*, ed. and intro. Frances K. Barasch (1865; rpt. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1968), p. viii.

[5]William Van O'Connor, *The Grotesque: An American Genre and Other Essays* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1962), p. 6.

> The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with
> his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the
> whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within it the
> whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous
> existence and composes a simultaneous order . . . . No poet,
> no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His
> significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his
> relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value
> him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison,
> among the dead.[6]

In the present study I hope to show the relevance of Eliot's remarks to the phenomenon of the grotesque in modern literature. The grotesque is not a modern development; some of its major literary sources are located in the philosophy, art, and literature of the Christian Middle Ages, and the peculiar effects produced by our modern writers cannot be adequately understood without reference to this long-standing tradition.

Modern interest in the grotesque is exemplified by Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. Although Kayser treats mainly German literature, his systematic study of the grotesque serves as an excellent springboard for the study of this phenomenon in the literature of other countries. Kayser takes a historical approach, beginning with the origin of the word in the late fifteenth century to designate the specific style of ancient paintings excavated from Roman caves (It. *grotta*, hence grotesque) and characterized by the mixing of animate and inanimate elements to produce a disconcerting effect.[7] Kayser

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[6]T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Major Authors Ed., 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), p. 2554.

[7]Kayser, p. 19.

traces the concept in its changing manifestations through succeeding periods of art and literature, but he looks back beyond the fifteenth century to discuss only two subjects, "The Temptation of St. Anthony"[8] and "The Dance of Death."[9] Failure to treat medieval literature is an obvious limitation of his study, for it implies that the concept of the grotesque originated concurrently with the word itself, a gross over-simplification, since the word was coined to describe art works already centuries old. Kayser acknowledges this limitation in a note:

> It is self-evident that the phenomenon is older than the name we assign to it and that a complete history of the grotesque would have to deal with Chinese, Etruscan, Aztec, and Old Germanic art as well as with Greek . . . and other literatures.[10]

Subsequent studies are similarly limited. Arthur Clayborough's *The Grotesque in English Literature*,[11] despite its inclusive title, is limited to a consideration of selected works of Swift, Coleridge, and Dickens. A number of other specialized studies have appeared, among them Lee Byron Jennings' *The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose*[12] and Peter Hays' *The Limping Hero: Grotesques in Literature*,[13] an anthropological approach limited mainly to modern

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[8]Kayser, p. 175.   [9]Ibid., p. 43.   [10]Ibid., p. 190.

[11]Arthur Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).

[12]Lee Byron Jennings, *The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose*, University of California Pub. in Modern Philology, Vol. 71 (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1963).

[13]Peter Hays, *The Limping Hero: Grotesques in Literature* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1971).

impotents. The only relatively complete study of the phenomenon in European art and literature is Thomas Wright's *A History of Caricature and the Grotesque in Art and Literature*,[14] which, besides being dated, concentrates mainly on caricature, makes little attempt to come to terms with the nature of the grotesque effect, and becomes little more than a catalogue of oddities. In addition to these studies, there are numerous dissertations concentrating on the grotesque as it is manifested in the works of particular writers or literary periods, but only one of these-- Thomas Jambeck's "The Elements of Grotesque Humor in the Passion Sequences of the Medieval English Cycle Drama"[15]--deals directly with the medieval period, and its scope is extremely limited. For other references to the medieval grotesque, we must turn to scattered comments such as those in Coleridge's "General Characteristics of Gothic Literature and Art" in *Lectures on Shakespeare* and Hazlitt's *Lectures on Dramatic Literature*[16] and general studies such as D. W. Robertson, Jr.'s, *A Preface to Chaucer*.[17] Commentary on the grotesque in the graphic arts is, fortunately, more plentiful, as we will see later in the study.

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[14]Wright; see note 4.

[15]Thomas Jambeck, "The Elements of Grotesque Humor in the Passion Sequences of the Medieval English Cycle Drama," *DAI* 70 (1969), 05860 (Univ. of Colorado).

[16]See the discussion of Coleridge and Hazlitt in Frances K. Barasch, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 152-54.

[17]D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (1962; rpt. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970).

Even so brief a review of the state of criticism of the grotesque reveals the need for an investigation of this phenomenon in medieval English literature. Such a study not only illuminates the grotesque literature of that period, but it also sheds interesting light on its uses in the modern literature of England and the United States.

One source of the grotesque as we know it is the tension between the formal moral and theological perceptions of the medieval churchmen and the more irrational beliefs held by the common people of the time. Medieval manifestations of this phenomenon have established a tradition which, though sometimes ambivalent, generally associates not only deformity and ugliness with evil, but also harmony and beauty with goodness, and modern writers use this tradition, either straightforwardly or reversed and contorted, to produce powerful thematic effects. By concentrating on the literary evolution of the most colorful of medieval dramatic figures--the Vice of the morality plays--we may demonstrate these ideas clearly.

Before developing this argument, I must deal briefly with two problems which this study will inevitably confront--the definition of the grotesque and a method for limiting my study.

The task of defining the term is complicated by the great number of writers who use it with no consistency of meaning. In the most extensive discussion of the history of the word, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, Frances K. Barasch puts the problem succinctly:

> . . . meanings did not remain static, for new perceptions and
> conceptions of the grotesque occurred with every new generation
> of artists and critics; each created its own grotesque art,

> understood the past in its own way, invested the word
> with its own meanings.[18]

Barasch traces these meanings through several centuries, but, although her book is invaluable to the student of the grotesque, she succeeds more in showing the variety of usage than in establishing a workable definition.

Before wading into the murky waters of his own psychoanalytical approach, Arthur Clayborough summarizes the previous attempts at definition and sees them as falling into four categories: The grotesque is defined in terms of (1) the conscious and unconscious attitudes and intentions of the author; (2) the effect or impression created upon the reader or spectator; (3) its relationship with other categories, such as the sublime, the ugly, the fantastic, etc.; or (4) the characteristic features of a limited but representative group of works.[19] Beginning with these categories, we will glance briefly at several attempts at defining the grotesque and discuss the limitations of each one.

Clayborough's own attempt to locate the grotesque in the interplay of conscious and unconscious psychological forces within the author is an excellent example of the first kind of definition. Using Jungian terminology, Clayborough distinguishes between four kinds of art based upon the "polarity [which] is an ineradicable characteristic of the human mind."[20] The first division of the mind is described as a progressive-regressive split:

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[18]Barasch, p. 152.

[19]Clayborough, p. 22.   [20]Ibid., p. 110.

The influence of the conscious mind (progressive aspect)
prompts us to be curious about the phenomenal world, to
regard it as ultimate reality and to seek fulfillment
through our relations with it. The influence of the
unconscious (regressive aspect) leads us to regard the
phenomenal world as superficial and transitory and to seek
a reality of a transcendental or mystical kind. What we
reject under the influence of these aspects may thus appeal
to us, simultaneously or subsequently, under the influence
of the other aspect.[21]

These oppositions are then used as the basis for another division--

positive and negative. Positive art is that in which "no inner conflict

is to be observed between the promptings of the [progressive and

regressive] impulses,"[22] while negative art is that in which "the content

is not wholly positive in the above sense."[23] The resultant categories

are thus regressive-positive, regressive-negative, progressive-negative,

and progressive-positive. Deliberately grotesque art is found only in

the two negative categories, for they are the ones characterized by a

conflict between psychic impulses, and it is out of this conflict that

the grotesque effect grows. Clayborough then applies his theories to

selected works of Swift, Coleridge, and Dickens. Although his approach

is clever and stimulating, his conclusions reflect the lack of concrete-

ness of his categories; his critical apparatus is unwieldly and overly

abstract, and, as Michael Steig points out, his approach is heavily

dependent upon accurate and detailed biographical information which is

often lacking and open to varying interpretations.[24]

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[21]Clayborough, p. 110.   [22]Ibid.   [23]Ibid.

[24]Michael Steig, "The Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 29, No. 2 (1970), 254.

The second type of definition--that which centers on audience effect--is exemplified by the theories of Lee Byron Jennings and Michael Steig. Jennings sees the grotesque as a "distortion" which "always displays *a combination of fearsome and ludicrous qualities*--or, to be more precise, it simultaneously arouses reactions of fear and amusement in the observers."[25] It is, then, in the interaction of these conflicting tendencies within the mind of the observer that the peculiarly grotesque effect is achieved. Jennings sees this effect in terms of a *"disarming mechanism"* which cushions the mind from the effects of either the extremely horrible or the radically comic: "The formation of fear images is intercepted, at its very onset, by the comic tendency, and the resulting object reflects this interaction of opposing forces,"[26] while "the playfulness is constantly on the verge of collapsing and giving way to the concealed horror."[27] But Michael Steig points out that, although Jennings' basic approach is sound, his "key terms are left rather abstract."[28] For example, Jennings locates the "fearsome" in "that region of the mind that we may call the demonic: the abode of dark destructive urges and mental torments, the region in which the fear of death prevails and the impulse toward destruction is born."[29] To correct this vagueness, Steig substitutes Freud's concept of the "uncanny" for Jennings' concept of the "fearsome," and the discussion then centers on "repressed infantile fantasies, wishes, or modes of thought, those in

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[25]Jennings, p. 10. Italics in original.   [26]Ibid., p. 15.
[27]Ibid., p. 16.   [28]Steig, p. 255.   [29]Jennings, p. 13.

general which remind us of primary psychic processes,"[30] themselves

highly ambiguous terms. It is thus doubtful that Steig's final defini-

tion of the grotesque as "the managing of the uncanny by the comic"[31]

represents a significant advance in concreteness over the theory

propounded by Jennings.

After tentatively defining the grotesque as *the unresolved clash

of incompatibles* [usually humor and horror] *in work and response*," or

"*the ambivalently abnormal*,"[32] Philip Thomson employs the third type of

definition by placing the grotesque in opposition to other "aesthetic

categories" and showing by contrast its essential features. The

grotesque, according to Thomson, differs from the absurd because the

latter may be totally unstructured and have "no formal pattern," while

the former must be structured around the conflicting opposites.[33] The

bizarre lacks the disturbing quality of the grotesque,[34] while the macabre

tends more toward the horrible and thus lacks the "balanced tension between

opposites which is a feature of the grotesque."[35] Caricature is too

straightforward for the grotesque effect;[36] irony is too intellectual;[37]

and the comic is too one-sided.[38] Thomson's work is most helpful, but

he constantly finds it necessary to qualify his definitions. For

example, his view of the differences between the macabre and the grotesque,

he says, "may be splitting hairs";[39] and "the choice between 'absurd' and

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[30]Steig, p. 256-57.   [31]Ibid., p. 259.

[32]Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, The Critical Idiom, No. 24, ed.
John D. Jump (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1972), p. 27.

[33]Ibid., p. 32.   [34]Ibid.   [35]Ibid., p. 37.

[36]Ibid., p. 38.   [37]Ibid., p. 47.   [38]Ibid., p. 50.

[39]Ibid., pp. 37-38.

'grotesque' . . . represents a false alternative" in many cases.[40] Such

qualifications, though necessary, take from Thomson's work much needed

conciseness and authority.

The fourth type of definition involves examining a selected body

of literature and isolating its common grotesque characteristics in

order to make a generalization. In *The Grotesque: An American Genre*,

William Van O'Connor very briefly examines grotesque works by Faulkner,

Flannery O'Connor, Sherwood Anderson, Nathanael West, Erskine Caldwell,

Carson McCullers, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Truman Capote, and

Tennessee Williams and defines the grotesque as "a new genre"[41] which

> has sought to incorporate the anti-poetic into the
> traditionally poetic, the cowardly into the heroic, the
> ignoble into the noble, the realistic into the romantic, the
> ugly into the beautiful. . . . The grotesque as a genre or a
> form of modern literature, simultaneously confronts the
> anti-poetic and the ugly and presents them, when viewed out
> of the side of the eye, as the closest we can come to the
> sublime. The grotesque affronts our sense of established
> order and satisfies, or partly satisfies, our need for at
> least a tentative, a more flexible ordering.[42]

This description is rhetorically attractive, but it too stops short of

clarity. What, for example, is the "sublime" in O'Connor's terms? And

how is it achieved by the grotesque? These are provocative questions,

but O'Connor, despite much that is valuable in his study, fails to

answer them convincingly.

A more comprehensive, and thus more satisfying, approach to the

problem of the grotesque is presented by Wolfgang Kayser in his classic

study. He surveys the history of the word and traces its development

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[40]Thomson, p. 31.   [41]W. V. O'Connor, p. 3.   [42]Ibid., p. 19.

through several literary periods before positing his three-fold defini-
tion: The grotesque is (1) "THE ESTRANGED WORLD" which is characterized
by suddenness and surprise;[43] (2) "A PLAY WITH THE ABSURD" which is
manifested in "the expression of our failure to orient ourselves in the
physical universe";[44] and (3) "AN ATTEMPT TO INVOKE AND SUBDUE THE
DEMONIC ASPECTS OF THE WORLD," which can be accomplished because, "In
spite of all the helplessness and horror inspired by the dark forces
which lurk in and behind our world and have power to estrange it, the
truly artistic portrayal effects a secret liberation."[45] Kayser thus
establishes the grotesque as a structure imposed upon the world, a
meaningful comment on the nature of that world, and a conscious attempt
to recognize and gain control of powers not fully understood. But does
he define it? Philip Thomson says that Kayser "offers not so much a
definition of the grotesque as a list of overlapping properties."[46]

I give this much detail about the attempts to assign a meaning to
a very slippery term not to be ungrateful for the work of these distin-
guished critics but rather to show the improbability of my coming up with
a universally acceptable definition. Each of those given above is
deficient in some way, since none, for example, has fully succeeded in
defining the grotesque from all four of the perspectives named by
Clayborough. The difficulty lies, however, not only in the range of
definition, but also in the terms which we must use in formulating it.
Like Addie Bundren in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, we realize that "words

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[43]Kayser, p. 184.   [44]Ibid., p. 185.   [45]Ibid., p. 188.
[46]Thomson, p. 18.

are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at."[47] As long as psychologists disagree over the exact meaning of such concepts as fear and laughter, or literary critics haggle over intentional and unintentional effects, or anthropologists dispute the relative value systems of different civilizations, there will be disagreement over the exact nature of the grotesque. This difficulty has not stood in the way of several excellent studies, however, and the problem is by no means unique to the grotesque. We need only search for a universally accept-able definition of such terms as "absurdism," "realism," expressionism," or even "novel" to see how the problem of definition pervades literary criticism.

The main thrust of my study will be to discover means of perceiv-ing the grotesque thematically, rather than to define it.

Hence, I will seek not an all-encompassing definition but rather a working definition which will allow me to examine the relationship of the grotesque elements within a work to the theme of the work. I acknowledge, first, that the grotesque, whether it is seen in a character or a situation, must display an element of distortion, of abnormality either physical or psychological. But the notion of abnormality is meaningless unless there is a norm against which to view it, and this norm varies from work to work. Second, in agreement with the theorists discussed above, I believe that the grotesque effect is characterized by the unresolved tension between conflicting opposites, usually humor and horror. But again we are dealing with relative terms, and the exact

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[47]Faulkner, *Dying*, p. 463.

nature of the humorous and the horrible will vary from work to work. Both elements of my definition point to the fact that the grotesque cannot be described in absolute terms outside of the sphere of the work in which it is contained. Accordingly, I choose initially to describe the grotesque in terms of the values embodied in that particular work: *The grotesque, through the conflicting tendencies of the humorous and the terrifying, embodies the negation of a preconceived norm implied within a particular work.* This negation can be direct, as we will see in the allegorical personifications of the "vice" in medieval literature, or indirect, as in the modern "anti-hero," whose grotesque characteristics often reflect adversely upon the values of society as a whole. With this tentative definition, it will be possible to shift the emphasis of the discussion away from the exact nature of the grotesque, although this problem will be confronted again and again in the course of my study, and to concentrate on the relationship of grotesque elements to themes and of themes to the prevailing social, aesthetic, and philosophical contexts of the periods to be studied.

If it appears that I am making of the grotesque a sort of latter-day Noah's Ark in which any conceivable creature may be housed, we must realize that we cannot speak of the grotesque in absolute terms. There is no one standard by which we may determine the degree of grotesquerie in all circumstances. The grotesque is an effect, a quality rather than a device. That is, a character or situation may be more or less grotesque depending on the degree of distortion and on the extent to which it embodies the conflicting tendencies of both the humorous and the horrible. The intensity of the conflict is what determines the relative grotesquerie.

The degrees of this effect are seen on a scale extending from the comic to the catastrophic, and on this scale there are infinite gradations. A grotesque character may be outrageously funny, but he can never be a mere clown, for the humor must be seen against a disconcerting background. Likewise, a grotesque character may be blatantly evil or disgusting, but he can never be perceived as simply repulsive, for such an effect is tempered by the laughter, whether it be straightforward or defensive, with which he is greeted.

In limiting my study, I will be forced to make some rather arbitrary selections. I am not attempting a history of the grotesque in literature; I want rather to show some of the threads which, knotted though they may be, connect the modern grotesque with its literary forebears. My study will deal mainly with the Vice figure and his literary descendants in medieval and modern literature, but I will also attempt to demonstrate what I believe to be evolutionary stages in the development of the grotesque by isolating certain of its uses in the other literary periods. The roots of our conception of the grotesque are deeply embedded in the consciousness of the Middle Ages. Accordingly, we will in the second chapter look not only to the literature of the period but also to other intellectual and social forces. An examination of the "aesthetic" writings of the early Church Fathers, of the beliefs of the common people of the Middle Ages, and of modern theories which attempt to explain the grotesque phenomenon in medieval graphic arts will, when applied to medieval literature, help to establish a literary tradition. Against this tradition, we will in subsequent chapters measure later uses of the grotesque and determine how their various effects are achieved.

Chapter 3 will explore the uses of this phenomenon by five modern writers, and Chapter 4, by examining representative works from the intervening literary periods, will show the grotesque to be a persistent, prominent, and potent element in our literary heritage.

THE GROTESQUE IN THE MIDDLE AGES: THE MAKING OF A TRADITION

> 'Le cose tutte quante
> Hanno ordine tra loro; e questo è forma
> Che l'universo a Dio fa simigliante.
> Dante
> *Paradiso*, I.104

A glance at the thought and art of the Middle Ages reveals an intense interest in, if not an obsession with, ugliness. Gargoyles scream from the tops of Gothic cathedrals. Creatures that are half-man, half-chicken dance madly in the margins of manuscripts. Demons, devils, and personifications of all the cruder aspects of humanity burst from the pens of poets and preachers and frolic across the medieval stage. That such figures are related to our concept of the grotesque may seem obvious, but the precise meaning and artistic significance of this ugliness is complex and shrouded in mystery only increased by the passage of time and incompleteness of records. To investigate this meaning will be the purpose of this chapter. There are certain assumptions that we may initially make with reasonable certainty. The first is that the Church had a significant influence. In the Middle Ages, as at no other time in history, culture was religious, and practically every art form was ecclesiastically oriented.[1] Thus, to begin understanding medieval art, whether ugly or beautiful, we must begin with the prevailing theological and philosophical ideas of the time. Yet we must

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[1] Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, trans. R. M. Montgomery (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), II, 112.

realize that formal theological ideas are only one aspect of religious life. Philosophy and theology are cloistered in concentrating on the intellectual elements of man's existence; art seeks to encompass both the mind and the heart. Accordingly, our investigation will go beyond intellectual formulations into the realm of the popular imagination. This dual approach will provide a background against which to comprehend the grotesque elements of medieval art and literature.

Concern with ugliness will naturally lead us to aesthetics, but our approach to medieval aesthetics must necessarily be circuitous for two reasons. First, as Monroe C. Beardsley points out, "The early Fathers of the Christian Church were too deeply absorbed in their immense theological tasks to be drawn into speculative or analytical inquiries that could not be brought directly to bear on their immediate concerns."[2] This attitude did not foster the writing of aesthetics, except that which grew out of their writings on other more immediate matters. One such matter was the relationship between Good and Evil and the means by which men could be persuaded to choose one and forsake the other. This concern has aesthetic implications, and it is by following the development of the aesthetic, as well as moral implications of Good and Evil, that we will come to understand the artistic significance of ugliness. The second reason for our indirect approach is that Christian theological assumptions did not originate fully developed at the birth of Christ. They were formulated over several centuries by Christian thinkers, of

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[2]Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 89.

whom St. Augustine was one of the more prominent, through the assimila-
tion of various ideas--mainly classical and Hebrew--into an amazingly
unified synthesis. The result was the doctrine of the medieval Church,
perhaps the most significant theological system in all of western
civilization. By examining some of the ideas adopted and modified by
these philosophers, we can better understand first the moral, then the
aesthetic assumptions of the cultural and philosophical milieu out of
which grew their conceptions of Good and Evil, beauty and ugliness.

One of the most influential classical thinkers was Pythagoras,
whose system, although we know little about it that is conclusive,[3] is
believed to have given the world one of its most durable conceptions of
order. As reconstructed by modern scholars, the original Pythagorean
brotherhood was a curious combination of ancient mystery cult and
revolutionary scientific community. From his discovery of the mathe-
matical basis of music,[4] Pythagoras formulated a coherent picture of the
universe and of human life in it. The "first principle" of the universe
was believed to be "number," at once the source and abiding governor of
the world. The universe was bounded initially by the imposition of Limit
upon the Unlimited.[5] A seed, incorporating both Limit and the basic
element of number, was planted in the Unlimited. As it grew, it

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[3]For what many consider to be the authoritative treatment of the
Pythagorean fragments, see G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Pre-Socratic
Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971).

[4]Edgar De Bruyne, *The Esthetics of the Middle Ages*, trans. Eileen
B. Hennessey (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1969), p. 48.

[5]Kirk and Raven, p. 229.

assimilated the Unlimited, bounded it, and imposed upon it a mathematical order. Not only did the universe then become as orderly as the musical scale, but this same order was manifested in all aspects of human existence. Just as the elements of the physical cosmos were Limit and the Unlimited, the elements of number were Even and Odd; those of shape were Square and Oblong; those of morals, Good and Bad. In all, there were "ten different manifestations of the two primary opposites in various spheres,"[6] and it was the proper relationship between these opposites that maintained universal order. The world and human life in it became a symphony if rightly approached, and the Pythagorean brotherhood imposed severe restrictions upon the beliefs and actions of its members to insure that they would recognize and emulate this harmony that was necessary if their souls were to escape the bounds of human existence and become one with the everlasting harmony of the universe. This emphasis on the mathematical basis of order was a lasting one, as we will see when treating medieval philosophers. The virtue of Pythagoras' system was its total integration of science and ethics, the physical and the moral. This virtue was, however, founded upon a weakness that would inevitably force its modification: The physical and the moral could be equated because Pythagoras did not think abstractly. To him, numbers, which we know to be abstractions, were real existents.[7] They were

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[6]F. M. Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 7.

[7]W. K. C. Guthrie, "Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), VII, 38.

material, and not just *a* material, but *the* material from which all else grew. In other words, he failed to distinguish between the abstract and the concrete.

Such a distinction was first clearly drawn in the works of Plato, who accepted the Pythagorean belief in the mathematical basis of the cosmos and in the immortality of the soul but who took a gigantic step forward in the perception of different levels of reality. This advancement is seen in the so-called Theory of Forms, which is given rather complete development in *The Republic*. While ostensibly describing the nature of the ideal state, Plato's Socrates reveals a great deal more. He states that there is more to the world than is perceived directly by the senses, or rather that there is another world beyond the reach of the senses, a superior world which can be approached only with the mind.[8] In that world, general concepts such as beauty and justice exist in pure, unchanging, everlasting Forms. An action was considered "just," for example, in the world of the senses to the extent that it reflected the nature of Justice in the world of Forms. Just as the Forms are on a higher level than the objects we perceive, there is a level above the Forms--the level of the ultimate Form, Goodness.[9] Knowledge of Goodness is essential to the perception of the other Forms, for without it, there is no basis for understanding why Justice and Beauty are good. To become a philosopher and, hence, a leader of men, one must go, according to

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[8]Plato, *The Republic*, Book 5, in *The Republic and Other Works*, trans. B. Jowett (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1960), p. 172.

[9]Ibid., Book 6, p. 202.

Plato, on an intellectual journey; one must break away from the sensual world and contemplate the World of Goodness and the Forms. A hierarchy is thus established. At the top is a world of eternally pure, unchanging reality; at the bottom is a world of images, shadows on the cave wall,[10] reflections which can never be the objects of knowledge. Knowledge of the superior world resulted in the "just man," whom Socrates equated with the happy man, one with a "well-ordered soul" in which reason was in control of the emotions and desires.[11] This belief is a direct descendant of the Pythagorean belief in harmony brought about by control, and the rewards of the two systems are similar (and prophetic of Christianity)-- the well-ordered soul becomes a part of universal harmony and exists in it forever. But there has been a change in the conception of Good and Evil. For the Pythagoreans, these moral elements existed in the same plane, and order resulted from maintaining the proper balance between the two. Plato made it possible to associate Evil with the sensual, the opposite extreme of the intellectual Good.

Intruding into this realm of classical order were the beliefs of another ancient civilization, the Hebrews, and those of a newly emerging but potent force which grew out of it, the Christians. The Hebrews had their own concept of order: They gave to the world a God whose infinite power had created the world from nothing and whose presence and guiding hand could everywhere and eternally be felt. "God has not only made them once and for all and chosen them," Erich Auerbach says, "but he continues

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[10]Plato, Book 7, pp. 205-07.

[11]Ibid., Book 4, pp. 132, 134-35.

to work upon them, bends them and kneads them. . . ."[12] God was complete.
Fear of Him and obedience to His laws were the hallmarks of the monistic
Jewish faith. There was no room in the Jewish universe for an opposing
principle, no room for a dualism between Good and Evil. Instead of a
potent, individually existing force, evil was seen as an inner reality
caused by rebellion against God's will.[13] The problem with such a
position is stated succinctly by Morton Bloomfield:

> Unless there is an absolute dualism [between Good and Evil]
> the reality of evil is, in effect, denied; for, assuming one
> good, omniscient and omnipotent God, evil must only, in at
> least the last analysis, be appearance. A strictly logical
> mind could see that, and strictly logical minds, driven by
> the evil about them, did.[14]

Among such logical minds were those of the Gnostics, some of whom were
so intensely conscious of the potency of evil in the world that they,
centuries before William Blake, denied that a good God could have created
such a world and attributed creation to an evil angel, Metatron.[15] Other
reactions included those of the Manichees, who believed in a thoroughly
dualistic struggle between Good and Evil for control of the universe.[16]

　　The complexity and, indeed, the brilliance of the Christian
synthesis can be seen in the works of St. Augustine, who took these ideas

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[12]Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western
Literature*, trans. William Trask (1946; rpt. Garden City, N.Y.:
Doubleday and Co., 1957), p. 15.

[13]Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, Studies in Language
and Literature (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1952), p. 10.

[14]Ibid., p. 11.　　　　[15]Ibid.

[16]St. Augustine, *The Nature of the Good*, trans. and ed. John H. S.
Burleigh, in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, Vol. VI of The Library of
Christian Classics (London: SCM Press, 1953), 326. Hereafter *Good*.

as raw materials and began the construction of a system which proved to be one of the western world's most durable influences.

Following the Hebrew tradition, Augustine accepted God as the moving force of the universe. In fact, he wrote several treatises refuting the dualistic doctrines of the Manichees, whose beliefs he had once shared.[17] He attributed their beliefs to an inability to "understand that every natural being, that is every spiritual and corporeal existent is good by nature," while "We, Catholic Christians, worship God, from whom are all good things, great and small."[18] This position is more strongly stated in *On Free Will*: "Nature is perfect. Not only is it free from blame but it deserves praise in all its order."[19] The problem with this position is the same as that with the original Hebrew belief: The reality of evil is denied, or as Augustine says, "We understand that no nature, or, if you prefer it, no substance or essence is evil."[20]

Augustine did not shy away from this problem but met it directly. To understand his justification for the exclusion of evil, we must look to the classical past. In an incredible passage, which shows both the utter sincerity and the extreme self-confidence of the early Fathers,

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[17] R. A. Markus, "St. Augstine," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), I, 198.

[18] Augustine, *Good*, pp. 326, 327.

[19] St. Augstine, *On Free Will*, trans. and ed. John H. S. Burleigh, in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, Vol. VI of The Library of Christian Classics (London: SCM Press, 1953), 196. Hereafter *Will*.

[20] St. Augstine, *Of True Religion*, trans. and ed. John H. S. Burleigh, in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, Vol. VI of The Library of Christian Classics (London: SCM Press, 1953), 246. Hereafter *Religion*.

Augustine makes clear his relationship to that past:

> If Plato and the rest of them, in whose names men glory, were
> to come to life again and find the churches full and the
> temples empty, and that the human race was being called away
> from desire for temporal and transient good to spiritual and
> intellectual goods, to the hope of eternal life, and was
> actually giving its attention to these things, they would
> perhaps say (if they really were the men they are said to have
> been): That is what we did not dare to preach to the people.
> We preferred to yield to popular custom rather than to bring
> the people over to our own way of thinking and living.[21]

In true typological fashion, Augustine portrayed Platonism and other

classical philosophies as preparation for Christianity, thus simultaneously

justifying his widespread dependence upon classical ideas, which is

nowhere more evident than in his treatment of Evil. As we have seen,

sensual phenomena in Platonic terms are merely reflections of the

intellectual phenomena in the World of Forms, all of which stem ultimately

from the Good. They were not seen as absolutely, but only as compara-

tively evil, because they contained some element of the Good which they

reflected. In a similar way, Augustine denied the existence of absolute

Evil by appeal to a hierarchical structure. God, the Christian equivalent

of Plato's Good, is the creator and thus the source of all the universe.

Since He is good, everything He created contains an element of the

original goodness. If goodness were entirely absent from an object, that

object could not exist since it would not be a part of creation. Thus

Evil, to the extent that it exists at all, is only comparative, or as

Augustine says, "Nothing is evil in anything save a diminishing of good."[22]

Augustine has cast Plato's World of Forms in a Christian mold. Where

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[21]Augustine, *Religion*, p. 229.

[22]Augustine, *Good*, p. 330.

Plato saw Good, Augustine saw God; when both looked at the natural,

sensual world, they saw only shadows. Augustine states it well:

> Although this earthly globe must be counted among corruptible
> things, yet it preserves, so far as it can, the image of
> higher things, and ceases not to show us examples and traces
> of higher things.[23]

The effects of Augustine's Platonism are widespread. Perhaps the

most important is the fact that the Christian universe, like its Platonic

predecessor, became hierarchical: Its components were arranged on a

continuum. One end of the series was fixed firmly on earth, where

"ordinary phenomena presented to the sense and feeling became names

written in water, dream children, phantoms floating by."[24] The other end

extended into the heavens and could be approached only with the under-

standing.[25]

The specific nature of this hierarchy was, however, ultimately

derived from Pythagoras' philosophy, which Augustine considered

"venerable and almost divine."[26] As we have seen, Pythagoras based his

system on the harmony displayed in the universe and emulated by man in

his attempts to escape his earthly limitations. Augustine, in a type of

"Christian Pythagoreanism,"[27] also gave priority to numbers. "Wisdom," he

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[23]Augustine, *Will*, p. 188.

[24]Katherine Everett Gilbert and Helmut Kuhn, *A History of Aesthetics* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), p. 150.

[25]D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer* (1962; rpt. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), p. 6.

[26]Eugene Portalie, *A Guide to the Thought of St. Augustine* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1960), p. 95.

[27]Gilbert and Kuhn, p. 131.

says in *On Free Will*, "has given numbers even to the smallest and most remote of things, and all bodies have their own numbers."[28] Numbers, in this view, are essences, and the contemplation of essences is the key to salvation. Augustine states this principle indirectly when he says that to do evil is

> to neglect eternal things which the mind itself perceives and enjoys and cannot lose, and to pursue, as if they were great and wonderful, temporal things which are perceived by the body, the lowest part of human nature, and can never be possessed with complete certainty.[29]

Gilbert and Kuhn say, "St. Augustine teaches that to spiritualize oneself is to formalize oneself. The way to salvation leads to order and number."[30] It is, then, the function of reason to perceive the numbers which underlie the seemingly disunited sensual world and tie it to the formality and unity of the world of God. This unity is the Good which as Augustine says in *The Nature of the Good*, resides in "those things which are found universally in spiritual or corporeal existence, measure, form, and order."[31] Evil is perceived as a reduction of this order, or as he goes on to say, evil is "nothing but the corruption of natural measure, form and order."[32]

Good is, then, intellectual in nature; it is realized through the mind's perception of the essences that reflect the unity of God and is explainable ultimately in terms of harmony, or the proper relationship of parts within a whole. Evil is not actually a negation of the Good because

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[28]Augustine, *Will*, p. 155.   [29]Ibid., p. 133.

[30]Gilbert and Kuhn, p. 133.   [31]Augustine, *Good*, p. 326.

[32]Ibid., p. 327.

the hierarchical structure imposed upon the universe makes both moral
concepts merely parts of a single edifice. Evil is the failure to
realize the universal order and is associated with the bodily senses
which distract the mind from its proper activity. It is, in other words,
disorder or lack of natural harmony.

These conceptions become relevant to our study in light of such
Augustinian statements as the following:

> Whatever delights you in corporeal objects and entices you
> by appeal to the bodily senses, you may see is governed by
> numbers, and when you ask how that is so, you will return
> to your mind within and know that you could neither approve
> nor disapprove things of sense unless you had within you,
> as it were, laws of beauty by which you judge all beautiful
> things which you perceive in the world.[33]

and "everything is beautiful that is in due order."[34] In these two
statements, Augustine associates beauty with the harmony of the numbers
perceived by the mind and with the order that is manifested in physical
creation. Aesthetics and ethics blend, since both beauty and goodness
are perceived in the same terms, those of numerical order. Aesthetics,
in these terms, become "mathematics incarnate in physical form," as
De Bruyne says.[35] To Augustine, then, beauty is synonymous with, or at
least a manifestation of, goodness. This conclusion is supported by a
number of other statements in which Augustine measures goodness by degrees
of beauty[36] and by the opinions of modern scholars.[37] The importance of

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[33]Augustine, *Will*, p. 161.   [34]Augustine, *Religion*, p. 265.

[35]De Bruyne, p. 48.

[36]See particularly Augustine's *Good*, p. 330, and *De Musica* I, xiii,
28, as quoted in Beardsley, p. 95.

[37]Beardsley, p. 93; Gilbert and Kuhn, p. 130; Tatarkiewicz, p. 50.
De Bruyne (p. 21) does not admit that the two are identical but says
that their essences "correspond."

this conclusion lies in the fact that Augustine's ideas, as one modern aesthetician puts it, "became the foundation of the aesthetics of the whole Middle Ages."[38]

To see how the churchmen of the Middle Ages associated beauty with formal order, we need only look at the statements of a few representative figures. According to Johannes Scotus Erigena, "Beauty expresses reason, order, wisdom, truth, eternity, greatness, love and peace--in a word, all that is perfect and divine."[39] Robert Grosseteste believed that "a being possesses beauty when it is clearly and manifestly in harmony with itself,"[40] while St. Bonaventure equated beauty with unity, equality, and order.[41] Proportion and form were also major factors in the aesthetics of Albert the Great, William of Auvergne, Alexander of Hales, Ulrich of Strasbourg, Thomas of York, and St. Thomas Aquinas.[42] So durable is this notion that it is repeated by Giovanni Savonarola, whom one scholar calls "the last voice of the Middle Ages."[43] "What then is beauty?" he asks in 1496; "It is a quality that results from proportion and symmetry."[44]

The Augustinian notion that beauty is synonymous with goodness also lasted throughout the Middle Ages. Alexander of Hales writes that "The good and the beautiful are always found together,"[45] while Thomas of

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[38]Tatarkiewicz, p. 54.   [39]Ibid., p. 96.   [40]De Bruyne, p. 64.

[41]Ibid., p. 65.   [42]Ibid., p. 91.

[43]Bede Jarrett, *Social Theories of the Middle Ages 1200-1500* (1926; rpt. Westminster, Md.: The Newman Book Shop, 1942), p. 265.

[44]Ibid., p. 264.   [45]De Bruyne, p. 91.

Vercelli, the mystic, euphorically tells us that "the pleasure of seeing Beauty and the gratifying joys of possessing the Good interpenetrate, and intellect and love are dissolved in the unity of ecstasy."[46] Alan of Lille sees the beauty of the world as a direct reflection of the beauty of God.[47] And St. Thomas states flatly that "the beautiful is the same as the good . . . ."[48]

What, then, is ugliness? In light of our discussion thus far, it should not be surprising that we find Augustine, in *The Immortality of the Soul*, defining ugliness as "a privation of form."[49] Nor should we wonder at William of Auvergne's contention that ugliness is a result of "an unsuitable form."[50] And it is in a discussion of order that St. Thomas Aquinas calls ugliness "whatever is impaired."[51] Ugliness takes from beauty what evil takes from goodness--formal order. Thus, what we have discovered by our investigation of classical and medieval ideas is simply that, to the medieval mind, goodness is beautiful while evil is ugly.

But is it so simple? No, because these terms have gathered numerous connotations as we proceeded. As goodness, beauty has acquired all the harmony and formality of Pythagoras' totally integrated universe,

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[46]De Bruyne, p. 99.   [47]Tatarkiewicz, p. 209.

[48]Beardsley, p. 102.

[49]St. Augustine, *The Immortality of the Soul*, trans. G. C. Leckie, in *The Basic Writings of St. Augustine*, ed. Whitney J. Oates (New York: Random House, 1948), I, 378.

[50]Tatarkiewicz, p. 217.

[51]St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica Part One*, in *The Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945), I, 378.

the richness and appeal of Plato's World of Forms, and the divinity of the Christian God. It exists on an intellectual plane, exercises dominance over human irrationality, and symbolizes a life that transcends this ephemeral, earthly existence. Ugliness, on the other hand, has been transformed into something strange and frightening. It is associated with rampant discord in a universe all but devoid of formal principles. It exists in a shadow world deprived of peace and virtue and subject to the finality of death, and it symbolizes a perversion of the one characteristic that distinguishes man from the animals--his rationality. Ugliness, to paraphrase William of Auvergne, is that which displeases God.[52]

These opinions of the Church Fathers become important in light of such decrees as that of the Nicene Council in 787: "The subject-matter of pictures should be decided by the Fathers, and not by the painter; he exercises discretion only over his art, that is, the technique."[53] Although there were undoubtedly exceptions to such rules, especially in the later Middle Ages, it is safe to assume that the churchmen did exercise a considerable influence over both the graphic and the literary arts. They gave us an aesthetics virtually indistinguishable from the moral theory of rational control of the senses and which saw art as fundamentally didactic. The implications of these ideas for our present study of artistic ugliness are perhaps best summarized by Isidore of Seville, who wrote that as a matter of aesthetic propriety the beautiful should be expressed in a beautiful form, the defective in a repulsive one.[54]

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[52]Tatarkiewicz, p. 219.   [53]Ibid., p. 94.

[54]De Bruyne, p. 154.

Since we know the moral associations of beauty and defectiveness, we can conclude that in the hands of the medieval churchmen, morality and immorality became visual, as well as spiritual realities. As we will see, this idea is reflected in the art of the period.

Before turning to this art, we must turn from the formal theological and philosophical realms to the perceptions of the popular imagination, which was undoubtedly influential. We have seen that in the hierarchical medieval world view, evil and ugliness could not be considered viable, independent entities. Such philosophical tendencies have led at least one prominent medievalist--D. W. Robertson, Jr.--to conclude that because of these "quiet hierarchies" the Middle Ages were devoid of the "dynamic tensions" to which the modern mind is acutely subject. He writes:

> It is noteworthy that [in Augustine's system] there is no opposition between the bodily senses and the understanding; they represent different ways in which the problem [of salvation] may be approached, and the way of understanding is superior to, but not opposite to, the way of the senses. The two approaches do not interact dynamically to produce the desired solution.[55]

Robertson has similar notions about Good and Evil.[56] Although these statements are true in one sense, they are misleading in several respects. First, Robertson fails to realize that it was the potency of evil in the world that forced Augustine and his colleagues to explain so rigorously and elaborately their positions on evil. Totally to ignore the viability of evil would be in effect to ignore one pole of existence. Such a position, given Augustine's personal and philosophical heritage, would be

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[55]Robertson, p. 6.   [56]Ibid., p. 23.

out of character, for as Auerbach says of him, "No one ever more passionately pursued and investigated the phenomenon of conflicting and united inner forces, the alternation of antitheses and syntheses in their relations and effects."[57] Second, and perhaps most significantly, Robertson fails to distinguish between the inevitable differences in philosophy as a discipline and life as it is actually lived. While it may be true that the formal philosophical oppositions were brilliantly reconciled, to believe that the sophisticated ideas of the erudite Church Fathers were so universally and sincerely held as to neutralize such potent conflicts as those between the senses and the understanding or good and evil is to display a naive philosophical idealism and a basic oversimplification of the medieval mind. James Bryce goes so far as to say that "at no other time in the world's history has theory, professing all the while to control practice, been so utterly divorced from it."[58] But this position is in its own way as extreme as that of Robertson. We need go no farther than G. G. Coulton, who says, "We shall stray very far from historical truth if we imagine that the medieval hierarchy . . . or even the whole body of the clergy, can by themselves give us an adequate conception of the average man's ideas."[59] A brief review of some of these ideas will serve to moderate the extreme formality and

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[57]Auerbach, p. 62.

[58]Herbert J. Muller, *The Uses of the Past* (New York: New American Library, 1952), p. 253.

[59]G. G. Coulton, *The Medieval Scene* (1930; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1961), p. 151.

piety of officialdom and to illustrate another integral shaping force of medieval art--what J. Huizinga has called "the extreme excitability of the medieval soul."[60]

This excitability is characterized at every turn by superstition, much of which ironically grew out of and was evident in the daily activities of the Church which tried to keep superstition in check. Examples of superstitious beliefs are abundant. The bells on medieval churches were believed to scare off demons[61] or to keep away storms.[62] Attending Mass was believed to have remarkably beneficial effects: A person would not age during the time spent in Mass, and regular attendance would prevent blindness and apoplexy.[63] The consecrated wafer used in the Eucharist was thought actually to become the body of Christ and to bleed if pricked by a dagger. The saints were also the objects of primitive beliefs. The bodies of some were thought to be incapable of decay and possessed of magical abilities. This last belief led to the so-called Cult of Relics, which grew to absurd dimensions. Muller reports

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[60]J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, trans. F. Hopman (1924; rpt. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), p. 11.

[61]Muller, p. 262. The following discussion of the medieval imagination is highly indebted to this fine study, which will be footnoted only when directly quoted or needed for emphasis.

[62]G. G. Coulton, *Medieval Panorama* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), p. 108. The following discussion of the medieval imagination is highly indebted to this fine study, which will be footnoted only when directly quoted or needed for emphasis.

[63]Huizinga, p. 139. The following discussion of the medieval imagination is highly indebted to this fine study, which will be footnoted only when directly quoted or needed for emphasis.

that several churches claimed to have vials of the Virgin's milk, two
possessed the actual head of John the Baptist, and some laid claims to
the actual relic of the Lord's circumcision. Such valuable objects were
not obtained by timidity, and there are reported cases of extreme
brutality in attempts to secure them. Umbrian peasants wished to kill
St. Romuald in order to be sure of his bones, and overly zealous
worshippers mutilated the body of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, removing her
hair, her nails, even her nipples. St. Thomas Aquinas also became a
victim of this mania; he was decapitated and boiled upon his death in a
foreign monastery.

A fascinating aspect of medieval religious superstition is seen
in its attitudes toward animals. Coulton reports numerous instances of
the excommunication of animals--such action was believed capable of
destroying eels in a lake, sparrows in a church steeple or grasshoppers
in a field. Bridaham tells of a pig which was hanged in a solemn ceremony
for eating a consecrated wafer, of animals being put on the rack to force
the confession of their sins, and of officers who understood such con-
fessions on hearing the grunts of the beasts.[64]

Such primitive beliefs, combined with what Muller calls the
"boundless passion"[65] of medieval man, resulted in an extreme volatility
of spirit manifested by the frequent and widespread violence which no
age, regardless of its placid hierarchies, can escape. The violence that

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[64]Lester Burbank Bridaham, *Gargoyles, Chimeres, and the Grotesque
in French Gothic Structures*, intro. by Ralph Adams Cram (New York:
Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1930), p. xii.

[65]Muller, p. 263.

pervaded medieval society ranged from the legality of wife-beating to the
ritualized violence of the code of chivalry. The Church itself set the
example for much of the violence. Thousands of persons were burned at
the stake for suspected witchcraft, and one medieval chronicler reports
the burning of 180 heretics in "a holocaust very great and pleasing to
God."[66] The Crusades, spiritual and altruistic in theory, were little
more than officially sanctioned bloodbaths. Celebrating the victory of
the First Crusade, the cleric Raimundus de Agiles tells of riding "in
blood up to the knees and even to the horses' bridles, by the just and
marvelous judgment of God."[67] Violence extended to every aspect of the
life of the Middle Ages. Rashdall tells of a furious battle which raged
between the students and townsmen of Oxford.[68] Starting in a tavern in
1355, the battle, which is known as the Town and Gown War, moved into the
streets and onto the campus. Rustics from the countryside rushed in to
help the townsmen, and the results are startling. Crosses were torn from
the hands of the clergy and dashed to the ground; twenty inns or halls
were pillaged; dozens of scholars were killed and their bodies mutilated;
and several chaplains were attacked and brutally scalped. Atrocious as
this battle may seem in isolation, it becomes even more so when put into
the larger context of social violence. As Rashdall says:

> The relation of the events of this one war will give a
> false impression unless it is remembered that the kind of
> fighting which we shall have to describe was perpetually
> going on in the streets of Oxford on a smaller scale and with

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[66]Muller, p. 263.   [67]Ibid., p. 261.

[68]Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of the Middle Ages*, rev. and
ed. F. M. Powicke and A. B. Emden (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936),
III, 95-99.

less fatal results . . . . . There are historic battlegrounds on which less blood has been spilt.[69]

Even more surprising is the fact that "the same narrative would be a sufficiently exact description of similar conflicts . . . at any other university town."[70] To complete the picture, we should observe that the violence was not limited to the lower classes of society but was common to heads of colleges, principles of halls, masters of arts, friars, and beneficed clergy.[71]

But life was not all fear of God and fellow man, for the people of the Middle Ages could also play. The churches themselves became trysting places for young lovers, and even the ever-ongoing pilgrimages were occasions for procuring sex as well as spiritual renewal. Students at Notre Dame had to be prevented, by threat of excommunication, from playing dice on the altar, and even the clergy, the supposed spiritual backbone of this theocratic society, were constantly berated for violating the vows of poverty and celibacy and succumbing to worldly pleasure.

The playful spirit of the times is clearly shown in the annual celebrations on religious holidays. These festivities included such holdovers from pagan traditions as mumming, which involved a sword-dance and the ritualized killing and resurrection of one of the dancers;[72] the so-called Boy-Bishop celebration, in which a child assumed the priestly robes for a sometimes boisterous celebration of the irrational;[73] and the

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[69]Rashdall, p. 95.   [70]Ibid., pp. 96-97.   [71]Ibid., p. 109.

[72]A complete discussion of mumming is found in E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), I, 205-27.

[73]Coulton, *Medieval Panorama*, pp. 606, 610.

Feast of Asses, which involved the introduction of an actual ass into the church building.[74] A clear instance of this gay spirit is seen in the annual observance of the Feast of Fools, in which a pope or archbishop of Fools was elected from the ranks of the lower clergy to preside over the feast which lasted for several days. About as religious in tone as our present-day Mardi Gras, the festivities are best described in a letter of condemnation written in 1445 by the Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris:

> Priests and clerks may be seen wearing masks and monstrous
> visages at the hours of office. They dance in the choir
> dressed as women, panders, or minstrels. They sing wanton
> songs. They eat black puddings at the horn of the altar
> while the celebrant is saying mass. They play at dice
> there. They cense the stinking smoke from the soles of
> old shoes. They run and leap through the church, without
> a blush at their own shame. Finally they drive about the
> town and its theatres in shabby traps and carts, and rouse
> the laughter of their fellows and the bystanders in infamous
> performances, with indecent gestures and verses scurrilous
> and unchaste.[75]

The letter attributes these ceremonies to "original sin, and the snare of devils."[76] That such ceremonies were not limited to Paris is shown by Coulton, who gives evidence of their observance and condemnation in several English cathedrals.[77]

The examples given above, which could be multiplied many times over, serve to demonstrate the difficulty of generalizing about the mind of the Middle Ages. These details also show the limitations of any study

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[74]Bridaham, p. xv.   [75]Chambers, I, 294.

[76]Ibid.   [77]Coulton, *Medieval Panorama*, p. 688.

which tries, as Robertson's does, to explain the whole society from the point of view of Christian hierarchical philosophy. The times defy such easy classification. On the one hand, we have the extreme piety and order of a world constructed on the unshakeable foundation of absolute faith--superbly formulated, brilliantly defended, infinitely logical, but ultimately sterile as a practical guide to daily living. On the other hand, we have the recklessness, naïveté, and irrationality of a childlike mind trying desperately to comprehend an already-adult world of ever-present violence and death, and opting, in the face of profound mystery, for the gratification of fleshly desires. These were the polar realities of the Middle Ages, and, far from being subordinated into quiescence, these forces existed side by side, creating the extreme complexity and ambivalence which gives the medieval personality a throbbing reality and makes its art a continual source of fascination for the modern mind, itself fragmented by numerous contradictory notions. Before explaining this modern world, however, we must see how these influences, both the formal and the popular, are manifested in medieval art and literature.

To bring order into our discussion, we will divide medieval art into three categories, even though such categories will necessarily be overlapping and somewhat arbitrarily imposed. Initially we will examine the art which seems most directly influenced by the formal aesthetic principles of the Christian philosophers we have studied. Second, we will look briefly at a motif which bears the distinctive stamp of the popular imagination. Against the background of these two categories, we will be better able to discern the nature of a third, more ambiguous and controversial area of medieval art--the so-called "grotesque" figures

which inhabit the margins of medieval manuscripts and the dark recesses
and roof-bosses of medieval cathedrals.

Emile Mâle, one of the most astute students of medieval
iconography, writes of the architecture of the Middle Ages:

> While the [Christian] doctors were constructing the intellectual
> edifice which was to shelter the whole of Christendom, the
> cathedral of stone was rising as its visible counterpart. . . .
> A whole dogmatic scheme found expression in concrete form.[78]

Although this may be slightly overstated, ecclesiastical influence in the
art of the Middle Ages is readily discernible. The Church Fathers, as we
have seen, saw art as fundamentally didactic, a means of teaching men how
to live their lives. The Good should be embodied in pleasing forms
characterized by symmetry and harmony of features. The Evil should take
on displeasing forms characterized by distortion and clashing charac-
teristics. That these principles are evident in medieval architecture is
shown so perceptively and completely by Adolf Katzenellenbogen, in his
Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Medieval Art;[79] that extended
discussion here would be superfluous. We offer only one example--the
virtue and vice cycle of the portal of the Chapter House at Salisbury
Cathedral (see Figure 1)--[80] to show one general tendency in medieval
sculptural representations of good and evil. Around the portal are
arranged in sequence fourteen virtues, each trampling on a corresponding

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[78]Emile Mâle, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the
Thirteenth Century*, trans. from 3rd ed. by Dora Nussey (1913; rpt.
New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), p. 23.

[79]Adolf Katzennellenbogen, *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in
Medieval Art* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1964). The tendency toward ugliness
in representing the vices is but one tendency among several others.

[80]All figures are shown numerically in the Appendix.

vice. The symbolism of the virtues triumphant is clear. Because of the pleasing regularity of their figures, the virtues display a serenity and quiet grace which stands in marked contrast to the physical distortion-- in some cases severe, as seen in the detail (Figure 2)--of the vices. The twisted body, the anguished expression, the inhuman shape of the vice show vividly the human world as it appears when perverted by sin.

This tendency to give visible expression to Good and Evil can also be seen in manuscript illumination, which O. E. Saunders calls "the basic art of the Middle Ages . . . the most general, and at the same time the most original of medieval art expression."[81] Medieval miniaturists found very fertile ground for the use of distorted forms in such biblical stories as the Apocalypse, illustrations of which abound in their art. Death riding a pale horse, the seven-headed beast, and the other striking elements of St. John's nightmare vision weighed heavily upon the imagination. Other instances of this tendency are found in the pictorial representations of the lives of the saints. The *Life of St. Guthlac*, which is illustrated in a twelfth-century manuscript in the British Museum, contains a scene in which the saint is being carried off by demons (see Figure 3). The contrast between the good and evil figures in these scenes is marked and its significance unmistakable. The saint's features are regular: his extended fingers appear slender and delicate; his eyes are rounded with surprise and quiet confidence; his body is supple. In vivid contrast are the features of the demons, each of which assumes a different, but equally unsettling, form. Some have bare but wrinkled

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[81] O. Elfrida Saunders, *English Illumination* (Paris: Pegasus Press, 1928), p. 1.

skin, some seem covered with hair, some with feathers. All have tails--either pointed or shaggy--nonhuman feet of different shapes, and revoltingly ugly facial features. Each seems to be partially animal. The evil which is inside them, which has led them to attack and attempt to carry off a man of God, has come to the surface, robbed them of even the semblance of humanity, and relegated them to a level characterized by loathing and disgust. Such are the consequences of evil.

This visual propensity can be seen in other illuminated manuscripts of the time. Figure 4, from the thirteenth century *De Quincey Apocalypse* in the Lambeth Palace Library, depicts the Allegory of the Penitent. This illustration is best described by Saunders:

> The penitent, represented by a young and graceful woman, [is] warding off the attacks of the devil with a shield, on which are inscribed the names of the Trinity: evil thoughts in the guise of huge flies hover above her, but are chased away by an angel with a fly whisk; another angel holds a sword, the fear of judgment, over her head; a peasant is laying an axe to the root of the tree under which she sits, which represents the world; on its topmost branch is perched a cock, to signify the preacher, crowing to the empty air; under the lady's foot is the vanquished serpent. This picture is another example of the symbolic method of teaching which was so dear to the medieval mind, and which is evidenced in so many pictures and diagrams in illuminated manuscripts.[82]

Again, good is grace and beauty; evil is repugnant, taking the form of flies, a serpent, and a horned, hairy, web-footed demon.

Manuscript illumination is capable of representing very fine detail, and because of this, it can represent visual good and evil in ways more subtle than the above examples indicate. A good example is seen in Figure 5, taken from the twelfth century *Psalter of Henry of Blois*

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[82]Saunders, p. 69.

in the British Museum. The illustration is of Judas' Kiss of Betrayal.
Evident is the poignancy of the face of Christ. The large oval eyes
looking upward toward heaven, the strangely moving look of acceptance
on the face, and the submissive backward arch of the body combine to
make the central figure one which immediately gains our compassion. Not
so with the other figures. Judas is a man in transition. He is not
still one of Christ's loving apostles, but he has not yet completed the
act which will signal his ultimate degradation. His flattened, pointed,
animal-like eyes and the somewhat sinister twist of his puckered mouth
only begin to suggest the ugliness which is all too evident in the figures
of the soldiers. Their faces are hideous, especially the noses, and the
teeth of some have become sharply pointed, like those of spiritual
carnivores eager to feast upon the finest of human flesh. The effect is
subtle and moving, but there is little ambiguity. The good are well
proportioned; the evil are distorted. Art of this type was directly
influenced by the aesthetic principles of the Church Fathers and worked
to make visual art a book of virtues and vices, legible even to the
illiterate.

The second category of medieval art--that affected by what we have
called the popular imagination--is best represented by the so-called
danse macabre, or Dance of Death. Although this motif received its most
perfect development in a work published in France in 1538, Hans Holbein
the Younger, the artist responsible, spent much of his life in London
and, in fact, became court painter to Henry VIII. Nor was Holbein working
with new ideas; his work was the culmination of a tradition at least two

centuries old and probably much older.[83] The dance may have originated

in the pulpit literature of the church, as G. R. Owst supposes.[84] But

the church alone was not responsible for its widespread popularity,

which is evidenced by the large number of extant examples.[85] The

intense fascination which this image exerted over the medieval imagina-

tion can be attributed to at least three factors. First, and perhaps

most significant, is the ever-presence of death in daily life, whether

caused by the continual violence or by mysterious visitations of diseases

such as the Black Death, which virtually depopulated whole villages.

Another factor contributing to the image's appeal for the average man is

the leveling effect of Death that is strikingly shown in the work.

Holbein's work consists of forty-one woodcuts, thirty-nine of which depict

Death, in the form of a skeleton, as he impinges upon the lives of people

from all levels of society. Not only does he plow with the peasant

(Figure 6) and tug at the foot-soldier (Figure 7), but he also holds

court with the pope (Figure 8) and dines with the king (Figure 9). A

third factor is connected with the starkness of the image itself. As we

have seen, medieval man lived violently and lustfully--when he fought, he

fought to the limit; when he played, nothing was too sacred to be treated

with joviality. To reach the minds of such people, an image had to be

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[83]An excellent general introduction to the *danse macabre* is found
in Thomas Frognall Dibdin, ed., *The Dance of Death and Holbein's Bible
Cuts* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896).

[84]G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Cambridge:
Cambridge Univ. Press, 1933), pp. 233, 484, 531, 596.

[85]For full discussion, see J. M. Clark, *The Dance of Death in the
Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Glasgow Univ. Publications, No. 86
(Glasgow: Jackson, 1950).

powerful. What was to call such men back from the world of the senses, to make them realize their own mortality? What else but an image so graphic and horrifying as a skeleton, a vivid reminder of the fate that awaits all men? The skeleton was, as Huizinga says, "a kind of spasmodic reaction against an excessive sensuality."[86] The function of the skeleton is, then, similar to the function of the distorted forms in the art of the first category. "Death awaits all people, regardless of time or social standing," the image proclaimed. And such thoughts were indissolubly linked in the medieval mind with the thought of eternal reward or damnation. The skeleton was the negation of all that is life, and in this negation medieval man saw his future and, ideally, began to alter his present life in an attempt to shape this future. Distortion of human features again serves a moral purpose. Like the demons of ecclesiastical art, the skeleton became a type of exhortation to virtue--before it was too late.

In light of what we have said about the art of the first two categories, the formal and the popular, it may now seem contradictory to suggest that such art contains comic elements, but this is the opinion of several authorities. Gundersheimer[87] and Clark[88] suggest the comedy of the Dance of Death by pointing to either the social satire, the anatomical distortions, or the varied postures and "facial" expressions

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[86]Huizinga, p. 141.

[87]Werner L. Gundershiemer, ed., *The Dance of Death by Hans Holbein the Younger* (New York: Dover, 1971), p. xii.

[88]J. M. Clark, ed., *Holbein's Dance of Death* (London: Phaidon Press, 1947), p. 22.

of the skeleton. There may also be humorous elements in the more formal
ecclesiastical art discussed earlier, particularly in the demons in the
Life of St. Guthlac and the Allegory of the Penitent. Of such charac-
teristics, E. Maunde Thompson writes:

> Even when representing Hell with its crowd of tortured
> figures of the damned, the artist can seldom resist making
> his devils so ludicrous, grinning a kind of schoolboy
> delight at the pains they are inflicting, that the place
> of torment loses half its terrors.[89]

Such playfulness would not be out of keeping with the lighter side of
medieval life as we have sketched it. But regardless of whether these
are accurate assessments of the art of the first two categories, there is
a third mode of medieval art--the realm of the "grotesque"--which has
almost universally recognized comic elements. The controversy which
surrounds this mode is, in fact, focused on the extent to which the artist
used his humorous characterizations for a serious purpose. As we explore
theories of the nature and the function of the grotesque figures, we will
be better able to see this third category as a natural development of the
same ideas which influenced the first two.

Gargoyles, chimeras, monsters, bi-corporates, composite forms
grotesques--these are some of the names which scholars give to the most
fascinating and baffling figures of medieval art. An assortment of
examples from both sculpture and manuscript illumination is given in
Figures 10 through 20. The variety of names is appropriate in light of
the diversity of opinion regarding the essence of these figures, whether

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[89]E. Maunde Thompson, *The Grotesque and the Humorous in Illuminations
of the Middle Ages* (London: n.p., 1896), p. 314.

they inhabit the margins of manuscripts or the roof bosses of the cathedrals. Architectural ornaments and manuscript illumination may be different in kind, but scholarly theories concerning the nature of the two run closely parallel; hence we are justified in treating the two distinct fields simultaneously, as we try to find a path through this dream world.

In this discussion we will begin by defining the grotesque in terms of incongruity, as have most of the scholars here discussed. The most obvious form of the grotesque is, in this view, the intermingling of disparate elements, of, say, man and animal or animal and man. But we shall see in the course of the discussion that the grotesque grows out of a much deeper consciousness of the medieval mind.

Although most observers of medieval art agree that there are comic elements in these characterizations, some see humor as the dominant, if not the only, element. E. Maunde Thompson, a nineteenth century commentator on manuscript illumination, states that the marginal figures have "no connection whatever with the character of the book itself"[90] and that--although there are indications of serious themes such as death, ridicule of the clergy, and the struggle between good and evil--the scenes are largely decorative and "good-natured jesting."[91] T. Tindall Wildridge says that grotesque architectural ornaments such as gargoyles are the "slang of architecture . . . introduced apropos of nothing."[92] These figures, he believes, originally held meaning for the people of

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[90]E. M. Thompson, p. 309.   [91]Ibid., p. 319.

[92]T. Tindall Wildridge, *The Grotesque in Church Art* (London: Wm. Andrews & Co., 1899), p. 2.

classical times, but the meaning was lost as the tradition was mechanically passed down to the "lesser minds"[93] of the Middle Ages. Ralph Adams Cram agrees that humor is the dominant element. Although he sees some serious elements resulting from attempts to understand a world "so baffling in its ways and generally incomprehensible,"[94] Cram says that these ornaments caused "delightful laughter and gaiety here and there under the hands of high-spirited or waggish workmen, and they, and the religion they expressed, were the better for the wholesome sense of life."[95] In general agreement with this group, if a bit more extreme, is Meyer Schapiro's view of the figures as "entirely without didactic meaning or religious symbolism."[96] They display, rather

> an attitude of spontaneous enjoyment and curiosity about the
> world, expressed through images that stir the senses and
> the profane imagination . . . . a world of projected
> emotions, psychologically significant images of force, play,
> aggressiveness, anxiety, self-torment and fear, embodied in
> the powerful forms of instinct-driven creatures, twisted,
> struggling, entangled, confronted and superposed. Unlike
> the religious symbols, they are submitted to no fixed
> teaching or body of doctrine.[97]

Opposed to this group which sees these ornaments as merely jokes or disembodied psychological images, there are those who believe that the images were significant either as representative of everyday life or of ancient pagan beliefs. Rejecting the notion that "those intricate but

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[93]Wildridge, p. 2.   [94]Bridaham, p. viii.   [95]Ibid.

[96]Meyer Schapiro, "On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art," in
Art and Thought, issued in honor of Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswami on the
occasion of his 75th birthday, ed. K. Bharatha Iyer (London: Luzac and
Co., 1947), p. 134.

[97]Ibid., pp. 134, 137.

whimsical designs are the mere doodling of the cloistered subconscious,"[98] T. S. R. Boase sees them as symbols that were taken from bestiaries, scientific books, and accounts of hunting and everyday life. These ancient themes were "gradually hallowed by an accretion of Christian association"[99] and were pressed into Christian service in ways not fully understood by modern man. Emile Mâle sees the architectural figures differently. He says of medieval artisans:

> The Church to them was the ark to which every creature was
> made welcome, and then--as if the works of God were not
> sufficient for them--they invented a whole world more of
> terrible beings, creatures so real that they surely must
> have lived in the childhood of the world.[100]

The sources for such inventiveness lay in the "old vague paganism of the Germanic tribes"[101] and the "depths of the people's consciousness, and had grown out of their fireside tales."[102] Lester Bridaham generally agrees with this view, but he is more specific than Mâle in assigning sources, which he sees as going "far back into antiquity when the awesome phenomena of Nature associated with fountains, springs, lakes or the sea were personified by some monster of horrible aspect."[103] A more detailed explanation of this view is given by Sheridan and Ross. They see the sculptural representations as signifying "pagan dieties dear to the people which the church was unable to eradicate and therefore allowed to subsist

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[98]T. S. R. Boase, *English Art 1100-1216* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 84.

[99]Ibid., p. 87.   [100]Mâle, p. 28.   [101]Ibid., p. 50.

[102]Ibid., p. 59.   [103]Bridaham, p. ix.

side-by-side with the objects of Christian orthodoxy."[104]   They go even
further, however, by assigning actual functions for these figures.
Since they see the basis of this motif as lying in "man's constant
awareness of dark spiritual forces which wait to snap him up and devour
him,"[105] Sheridan and Ross see the grotesques as a means of averting
evil by incorporating it into the religion and thereby gaining some
control over it, in some ways like the control which cavemen believed
to gain over animals by painting them on their walls. The figures are
embodiments of evil used in a moral sense.

By assigning such a function to the grotesques, Sheridan and Ross
show some affinity to the next group of scholars, who see a symbolic
function in the manuscript and cathedral ornaments. In two fine studies,
Lillian Randall demonstrates convincingly that the explanation for many
of the obscure scenes in the manuscript margins can be found in the
exempla, the tales used by the preaching friars to "divert and, to varying
degrees, to focus attention on the main discourse."[106]   Since *exempla* were
used generally to point a moral, the function Randall assigns to these
figures is in some ways similar to that assigned to the architectural
figures by Sheridan and Ross, since in both cases the figures are used to
represent the struggle against evil. Randall is confident that further

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[104]Ronald Sheridan and Anne Ross, *Gargoyles and Grotesques: Paganism in the Medieval Church* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), p. 8.

[105]Ibid., p. 10.

[106]Lilliam M. C. Randall, "Exempla as a Source of Gothic Marginal Illumination," *The Art Bulletin*, 39 (1957), 101.

study will be fruitful in discovering more meanings for the miniatures: "Without a doubt," she says, "a basis in fact, popular tradition, or the Scriptures originally linked many of the more ambiguous motifs to the text,"[107] even though many of the links have been lost. D. W. Robertson, Jr., goes further in assigning symbolic meaning to grotesque figures. Citing Guillame de Conches' commentary on Boethius, Robertson shows that there was a concern in the Middle Ages for the so-called "metamorphosed man,"[108] one whose human features had gradually conformed to those of beasts through the effects of sin. There was an elaborate system of symbols in which animals corresponded to certain human shortcomings. This idea, manifested in visual form, made monsters and grotesques "reasonable media for the communication of ideas."[109] This is a fascinating view, though Robertson leaves it relatively undeveloped.

A theory with implications similar to these is proposed by G. C. Druce, who has found analogues for several composite figures. By careful study of several manuscripts, Druce has discovered that certain of the figures compounded of human and animal features can be shown to have definite symbolical associations. He shows, for instance, that satyrs--little men with hooked noses, horns on the forehead, and goat's feet--are described by Clement of Alexandria, Jerome, and Gregory as the very type of the demon.[110] Similar associations surround the Siren (see

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[107]Lillian M. C. Randall, *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1966), p. 14.

[108]Robertson, p. 54.   [109]Ibid.

[110]G. C. Druce, "Some Abnormal and Composite Human Forms in English Church Architecture," *Archaeological Journal*, 72 (1915), 153.

Figures 11 and 14). The author of a Latin bestiary of the tenth century gives a very vivid description, here summarized by Druce, of the Siren and its effects:

> The sirens, he says, are death-dealing animals which from the head down to the waist have a human form but the lower parts and the feet have the form of birds. And they sing a certain musical and sweetly melodious song; so that by the charm of their voice they enchant the ears of men who are sailing a long way off, and draw to them, and seduce their ears and senses by the extraordinary rhythm and sweetness (of their song) and lull them to sleep. Then at length when they see them sunk in a deep sleep, they suddenly attack them and tear their flesh in pieces, and thus by the influence of their voice they deceive ignorant and careless men and do them death.[111]

The Sirens were used as a warning against "pleasure."[112] They were not, however, always visualized thus. Philip de Thaun, in a twelfth century bestiary, describes Sirens as "having the form of a woman down to the waist, the feet of a falcon, and the tail of a fish."[113] Elsewhere they are described as having "heads and bodies of maidens as far as the breasts, below as fish, and with the wings of birds."[114] In light of these varying descriptions, each of which is ultimately associated with the same serious moral purpose of warning men against the lure of the flesh, we can never again look at the illustrations as simply "good natured jesting." If the Sirens can have so many forms, each of which represents the same principle, what are we to make of the other figures which "people" the cathedrals and manuscripts? Do they also have moral significance? Druce suggests that this is the case with other figures such as giants, pygmies, centaurs, and onocentaurs. Although he admits

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[111]Druce, p. 170.   [112]Ibid.   [113]Ibid., p. 171.

[114]Ibid., p. 172.

that certain architectural ornaments may be merely "fanciful combina-tions,"[115] Druce has effectively demonstrated that, in at least some instances, the figures must be taken seriously.

A compromise position is taken by Klingender, who feels that these figures were designed by the Church Fathers with a very serious moral purpose stimulated by the belief that mankind is constantly pursued by the devil.[116] The figures themselves, he believes, resulted from the process of "adding together parts of the different animals whose supposed [symbolical] qualities they wanted to combine,"[117] in a way similar to that suggested by the "metamorphosed man" of Robertson. The humorous elements were the work of lay masons who could not resist "a merely aesthetic or humorous elaboration."[118] Thus, Klingender concludes, the figures represent serious moral principles modified by a "sudden welling up of repressed fantasies."[119]

What are we to conclude from this variety of critical opinion? Each of these views can be readily supported by reference to medieval society. Those who claim that the grotesque art is pure humor may look to the lustier side of medieval life, to the ever-pressing sexual desires or the sense of play evidenced by the feasts. Those who claim a serious symbolical function for all art call upon the Church Fathers for support and find it in abundance. Those who see it as the sudden eruption of

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[115]Druce, p. 135.

[116]Francis Klingender, *Animals in Art and Thought to the End of the Middle Ages*, eds. Evelyn Antal and John Harthan (London: Routledge & Kegal Paul, 1971), p. 334.

[117]Ibid.   [118]Ibid.   [119]Ibid., p. 335.

suppressed fantasies can look to the superstitious nature of the people.
But we shall err badly if we see these forces as distinct, if we view
medieval society as split between those who adhered solely to the formal
church principles and those who surrendered to the pleasures and the
fears of the world. Were not the members of the clergy constantly
ridiculed for their worldly concerns? Did not the common man have such
strong religious beliefs that the natural world took on a pervasive super-
natural character? If there are works of art which embody either the
influence of formal aesthetics or that of the popular imagination, and
we have suggested that there were, we should not be surprised to see an
art which embodied the conflict between the two. Muller says that the
people of the Middle Ages "could never really lose themselves in God or
find themselves on earth."[120] Medieval man was pulled toward extremes,
but he did not live in them. Rather, he inhabited an amorphous middle
world of faith and folly, religion and superstition, humor and horror.
These conflicting forces are the elements of the grotesque. Thompson and
Wildridge are most likely correct in their assertions of "good-natured
jesting" and "slang" but so are Druce and Robertson in their symbolical
interpretations. The *exempla* undoubtedly had an influence, as Randall
suggests, but Male, Bridaham, and Sheridan and Ross are probably also
correct in finding pagan elements. That there is an element of psycho-
logical release must also be credited. All of these views can be contained
within the ambivalence of grotesque art. The fanciful incongruity or
pointed satire of some of the composite figures surely evoked a laugh

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[120]Muller, p. 266.

from the lusty men of the Middle Ages, but this laughter was complex,
for behind it lay the awareness of the dark forces of evil waiting to
snap man up and cast him into hell, of the pagan gods who had been
rendered only incompletely impotent, and of the supernatural world,
which was in many ways the only world they knew. The laughter became
nervous, and grotesque art was born.

Our concern is with the function of grotesquerie in this art, and
this function can be discerned clearly against the background of the
other categories of art which we have discussed. Ugliness in art
influenced by formal principles was used to embody evil, to show in visual
terms the effects of sin or of the repudiation of the good. In the Dance
of Death, the distortion of human characteristics made graphic man's
ultimate fate; as such, it revealed to him his ephemeral nature and
exhorted him to prepare his soul for its final test. The distortion in
the formal category is linked to that of the popular by a common principle
of negation. To preserve men from the forces of evil--which was, under-
lying all other considerations, the main concern of medieval art--artists
employed visual opposites. The beauty of Christ was opposed to the
unsettling forms given to those who would do him harm. The vitality and
security of life at all levels were opposed to the grinning skeleton.
And each representation served a moral purpose. The grotesque operated
in much the same way. Whether we speak of a gargoyle used to scare away
evil spirits, a hybrid figure used to illustrate a moral homily, or a
priestly chicken used to ridicule the practices of the Church, the
principle is the same, as is its position in a vast moral scheme of cosmic
implications. The difference in the grotesque art and that of the other

two categories lies, then, not just in the external considerations of physical distortion but also in the multiplicity of its appeals--those of mingled humor and horror--although as we have seen, this distinction may ultimately be one of degree only. The total effect of such multiplicity upon the minds of the Middle Ages can only be vaguely discerned by a modern audience. One thing is clear, however, from the preponderance of grotesque figures--this effect, whatever it may ultimately have been, was a dominant characteristic of medieval art.

These generalizations will become clearer as we examine the grotesque effects in medieval literature. Before proceeding, however, we must briefly examine the inherent differences between the visual and the literary arts. In a chapter called "Verbal and Plastic Expression Compared," J. Huizinga makes the following observation:

> The whole domain of the comic is much more open to literature than to plastic art . . . . Whenever the eye suffices for communicating the sense of the comic, however airy it may be, art is able to express it as well as, or better than, literature. Apart from this, pictorial art can never express the comic.[121]

What is true of the comic is also, to a certain extent, true of the horrifying, for visual art has difficulty in expressing abstract psychological incongruity and horror. Plastic art must create these effects in visual terms, whereas literature uses language to achieve the same effects. The implications of this idea for our study are several, but most important is that the ugliness which we have stressed thus far can, in literature, assume a different form. In our discussion of medieval aesthetics, we associated ugliness with discord, vice, ephemera,

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[121]Huizinga, pp. 279, 282.

irrationality. In visual terms, these assumed distorted forms, but in literature the same effects may be created in dialogue, in situation, or in narration; that is, freed from the strictures of visual representation, characters and situations may assume an outward semblance of normality while revealing their inward degradation through speech and action. The means are different but the end is the same.

The clearest example of medieval literary grotesquerie is the "Vice" of the morality plays. A clear conception of this character's ambivalence will provide a background for examining other, perhaps more subtle, embodiments of the grotesque mode. The moralities are allegorical enactments of the struggle between Good and Evil for control of the human soul and are directly traceable to the influence of such motifs as the Dance of Death, which we have already discussed, and Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, which C. S. Lewis, in *The Allegory of Love*, found arche-typical of all allegorical representations of the battle between the virtues and vices.[122] The characters of the moralities are of three sorts, and their attributes are summed up in the names they assume. Man is represented by such characters as Mankind, Humanus Genus, Youth, or Humanity; Good by Mercy, Reason, Deus, Conscience, or Pity; and Evil by Bad Angel, the Deadly Sins, Folly, Sensual Appetite, Detractio, or Stultitia. The typical plot centers around a contest in which the evil characters, generally known as the vices, attempt to lead man astray, to

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[122]C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1936; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959), p. 73. A fine analysis of the influence of Prudentius on the English morality drama is found in Elbert N. S. Thompson, *The English Moral Plays* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1910), pp. 320-333.

convince him that he should give free reign to his sensual impulses and that the life of goodness is either dull or to be reserved for old age. Opposed to these characters are those of the good, known as virtues, who try to warn man of the consequences of evil and thus to secure ever-lasting peace for his soul. Man is pulled now one way, now another, and ends in hell for refusing to repent of his sins, as in *Enough is as Good as a Feast*, or in heaven either because of the good influence of a virtue, as in *The Interlude of Youth*, or through the grace of God, as in *The Castle of Perseverance*. So typified, the plays sound wooden and dull, and they remain so to many modern readers, but in dramatic produc-tion the moralities achieve tension which gives life to their "bloodless abstractions" and develop the suspense which is the heart of all literature.

The self-conscious duality of these plays is evident from their prologues and advertisements. *Enough is as Good as a Feast*, though it ends with the hero being cast into hell, is described as a "comedy . . . [that] shall please them that of mirth be desirous."[123] The main characters of *All for Money* also end in hell, but the play is called "A Moral and Pitiful Comedy,"[124] while the prologue dubs it "a pleasant Tragedy."[125] The unfortunate consequences which the characters meet in *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* are seen in what is described as "A moste

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[123]*Enough is as Good as a Feast*, in Edgar T. Schell, ed., *English Morality Plays and Moral Interludes* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 37. Hereafter *Enough*.

[124]*All for Money*, in Schell, p. 421. Hereafter *Money*.

[125]Ibid., p. 420.

pleasant and merry commody, right pyhtie and full of delight";[126] *Appius and Virginia* is called "A new Tragicall Comedie";[127] and *A Comedy of King Cambyses* is "A lamentable tragedy mixed ful of pleasant mirth."[128] Although these examples could be multiplied,[129] the pattern is obvious—the plays manifest conflicts of emotions. An examination of these conflicts and the ways in which they are produced reveals that the effect is similar in kind to the visual grotesquerie of medieval art and that the parallel effects arose from similar impulses.

The means whereby the tension of the moralities was achieved was the "Vice." That these figures are comic is everywhere obvious. Humor is, in fact, so prevalent that the problem lies not in locating humorous effects, but in selecting and classifying them in a way which will bring order into the discussion of so varied a field. A few examples from a representative selection of the plays are enough to serve as a basis for a fuller analysis of the grotesque effect.

Part of the comic effect is achieved through the Vices' use of language. Sometimes their speech is characterized by nonsense words. In *Mankind*, for example, Mischief says to Mercy, "Musse-masche,

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[126]Quoted in Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958), p. 114. My discussion of the dual nature of the morality plays is highly indebted to this fine study.

[127]Quoted in Spivack, p. 115.

[128]*King Cambyses*, in *Dodsley's A Select Collection of Old English Plays*, ed. W. Carew Hazlitt, 4th ed. (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964), IV, 158. Hereafter *Cambyses*.

[129]See Spivack, pp. 113-130.

dryff-draff / Sume was corn and sume was chaffe";[130] while Sedition, in
Kynge Johan, says of political ideas, "they are but dyble-dable. / I
marvell ye can abyd suche byble-bable."[131] But often the Vices' jabs are
more pointed and satirical, as in their intentional misuse of words.
Newguise, in *Mankind*, substitutes "demonycall" for "dominical" and
"yowur negligence" for "your reverence";[132] and Dissimulation, in *Kynge
Johan*, refers to the pope as "Yowr Horryble Holiness."[133] Occasionally
the use of a clever euphemism is the source of pleasure, as in *Hickscorner*
where Freewill refers to a hanging as a "ride in the haven of hemp."[134]
In *Appius and Virginia*, Haphazard enters after talking with the devil and
says, "Who dips with the Devil, he had need have a long spoon."[135] *Kynge
Johan* contains a graphic example of another aspect of the vices'
playfulness--vulgarity. This is seen in the following exchange between
Sedition and Private Wealth:

> Sedition: I wold thow haddyst kyst hys [the pope's]
>   ars, for that is holy.
> Private Wealth: How dost thow prove me that his arse ys
>   holy now?
> Sedition: For yt hath an hole, evyn fytt for the nose
>   of yow.[136]

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[130] *Mankind*, in Mark Eccles, ed., *The Macro Plays*, Early English Text
Society, No. 262 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), p. 155.

[131] *Kynge Johan*, in John Matthews Manly, ed., *Specimens of the Pre-
Shakespearean Drama. With an Introduction, Notes, and a Glossary*
(New York: Ginn and Co., 1897), I, 531. Hereafter *Johan*.

[132] *Mankind*, pp. 159, 168.   [133] *Johan*, p. 556.

[134] *Hickscorner*, in *Dodsley's*, I, 185.

[135] *Appius and Virginia*, in *Dodsley's*, IV, 118. Hereafter *Appius*.

[136] *Johan*, p. 556.

Similarly, we see Nichol Newfangle in *Like Will to Like* playing with the rhyme of Nichol and "Lick-hole"[137] and Ambidexter in *King Cambyses* giving two meanings to the word "corner."[138] In other plays, notably *Mankind* and *The Castle of Perseverance*, vulgarity is used for its own sake, without the saving grace of wit.

Other sources of comedy are found in the interaction of the vices with each other and with the other characters; this action is usually characterized by slapstick humor, braggadocio, cleverness, and general over-acting. There is a loud and boisterous dice game in *Nice Wanton*,[139] and *Mankind* contains a mock Court of Mischief, in which Mischief, Nought, Nowadays, and Newguise convince Mankind to change the style of his coat.[140] In the late morality, *Wit and Science*, Idleness attempts unsuccessfully to teach Ignorancy his own name, and the dialogue is characterized by comic misunderstandings ("Ing-no-ran-his-s-s-s")[141] and vulgar interchange ("I would thy mother had kissed thy bum.").[142] The vices also exaggerate and show mock concern. Inclination, in *The Trial of Treasure*, says to Lust and Sturdiness, "Look on this leg, ye prating slaves, / I remember since it was no bigger than a tree."[143] After the death of the queen in *King Cambyses*, Ambidexter raises a mournful cry of "O, O, my heart, my heart;

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[137]*Like Will to Like*, in *Dodsley's*, III, 314, 332. Hereafter *Will*.

[138]*Cambyses*, p. 178.

[139]*Nice Wanton*, in *Dodsley's*, II, 169 ff. Hereafter *Wanton*.

[140]*Mankind*, pp. 175-77.

[141]*Wit and Science*, in Schell, p. 217.   [142]Ibid., p. 214.

[143]*The Trial of Treasure*, in *Dodsley's*, III, 269. Hereafter *Trial*.

O, my bum will break."[144]   But although the vice is funny, he is usually

not stupid, as we can see from the way he makes fun of the other charac-

ters.   In *The Conflict of Conscience*, Hypocrisy mimics Avarice, Tyranny,

and Cacon:

    Hypocrisy: [aside] Farewell three false knaves as between
                this and London.
    Tyranny: What say'st thou?
    Hypocrisy: As honest men as the three kings of Cologne.[145]

Similar scenes may be found in *The Trial of Treasure*, *King Darius*, and *The*

Marriage of Wit and Wisdom.

The slapstick elements are most often seen in fight scenes, which

are found in virtually all of the moralities.   Perhaps the funniest of

these are found in *King Cambyses*, in which Ambidexter fights first with

the clowns Huff, Snuff, and Ruff; and later with Hob and Lob and

Marion-May-Be-Good, Hob's wife.   The stage directions give a clear picture

of the nature of these encounters:

    [Here let them fight with their staves, not come near
    another by three or four yards; the Vice set them on as
    hard as he can: one of their wives come out, and all to
    beat the Vice, he run away.][146]

Nor do the vices accept defeat gracefully.   After his overthrow in the

assault on the castle, in *The Castle of Perseverance*, Bad Angel laments:

                I carp, I cry, I cower, I kacke
                I fret, I fart, I fizzle foul.
                I look like an owl.[147]

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[144]*Cambyses*, p. 243.

[145]*Conflict of Conscience*, in *Dodsley's*, VI, 77. Hereafter *Conflict*.

[146]*Cambyses*, p. 178.

[147]*The Castle of Perseverance*, in Schell, p. 74. Hereafter *Castle*.

To the extent that they evoke laughter, the vices are attractive. But they are appealing for reasons other than those of witty language, conversation, and slapstick comedy. They impart a spirit of gaiety and freedom to the atmosphere by their dancing and singing. "By hap or by hazard we sing, ere we cry," says Mansipulus in *Appius and Virginia*, "Then sing, let us say so, let sorrow go by."[148] It is a call away from responsibility and pain, a call that is repeated in play after play. In *Like Will to Like*, Nichol Newfangle sings, "And now will I dance, and now will I prance, / For why I have none other work."[149] Hypocrisy in *The Conflict of Conscience* joins the chorus:

> Nay, I must sing too, heigh, dery, dery, dery.
> I can do but laugh, my heart is so merry;
> I will be minstrel myself, heigh, didle, didle, didle.[150]

But the gay spirit and freedom of the world of the vice is best summed up by Sensual Appetite, in *The Four Elements*, who pushes his way through the audience with this blustery song:

> Make room, sirs, and let us be merry,
> With huffa gallant, sing tirl on the berry,
> And let the wide world wind!
> Sing, frisky jolly, with hey troly lolly,
> For I see well it is but folly
> For to have a sad mind:
> For rather than I would use such folly,
> To Pray, to study, or be pope holy,
> I had as lief be dead.[151]

It is, however, precisely in such a carefree mood that we begin to discern the antithetical side of the Vice's character. For, as Bernard Spivack says:

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[148]*Appius*, p. 122.   [149]*Will*, p. 332.   [150]*Conflict*, p. 78.

[151]*The Four Elements*, in *Dodsley's*, I, 20. Hereafter *Elements*.

> This whole body of mirth is purveyed by vice in a context
> where there is no such thing as innocent merriment, where
> levity, even in a form so apparently harmless as music, is
> the positive sign of virtues' absence.[152]

The vices are opposed to the virtues, and it is their responsibility

in the play to win man over to the sensual side of existence. Since in

the Middle Ages such a move implied certain damnation, the vices become

objects of fear. Hypocrisy, in *Lusty Juventus*, tells the Devil of his

plan to trap the hero: "I will use such a sleight, / That shall trap him

in a snare."[153] In *The Tide Tarrieth No Man*, Courage sings as he steers

his metaphorical ship "To the Devil of Hell."[154] Lechery, in *The Castle*

of Perseverance, makes his plan explicit to a colleague:

> Sir Flesh, now I wend
> With lust in my lende
> To catchen Mankind
> To the devil of Hell.[155]

The Vice is the "opponent of Good and the corrupter of humanity," says

L. W. Cushman, and as such he "is not a purely humorous character. One

feels that what he says and does has always a background of malicious-

ness."[156] That modern interpreters are not the only ones conscious of

the dual nature of these characters is evidenced by the speeches of the

vices themselves. In Skelton's *Magnificence*, Cloaked Collusion says, "My

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[152]Spivack, p. 121.

[153]*Lusty Juventus*, in *Dodsley's*, II, 68. Hereafter *Juventus*.

[154]*The Tide Tarrieth No Man*, in Schell, p. 314. Hereafter *Tide*.

[155]*Castle*, p. 33.

[156]L. W. Cushman, *The Devil and the Vice in the English Dramatic Literature Before Shakespeare*, Studien zur Englischen Philologie (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1900), pp. 70, 102.

speche is all Pleasure, but I stynge like a waspe,"[157] and Courage, the vice in *The Tide Tarrieth No Man*, sums up himself and all of his kind:

> For as in a bee
> For certain we see
> Sweet honey and sting
> So in my mind.[158]

Our study of medieval aesthetics has led us to expect evil usually to assume the visual aspect of distortion. There are a few indications that the evil characters which we are discussing exhibited, in many cases, just such forms. The minor vices in *All for Money* are dressed in devil's garb, which is generally regarded as appalling: Damnation enters with "a terrible vizard on his face," and Gluttony and Pride are "dressed in devil's apparel."[159] The vice in Heywood's *Play of Love* enters with "a hye copyn tank on his head full of squibs fired."[160] Distortion of a milder sort is exhibited by the vice in *King Cambyses*, who appears with "an old capcase on his head, an old pail about his hips for harness, a scummer and a pot lid by his side, and a rake on his shoulder."[161] A corollary to such visual expression can be seen in *Wisdom*. When Anima, the personified human soul, falls under the influence of the vices, she loses her beautiful countenance and "apperythe in the most horrybull wyse, fowlere than a fende."[162] She is so corrupted that the Seven Deadly Sins become her constant companions, as can be seen from this most interesting stage direction: "Here rennyt owt from wndyr the horrybul

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[157]Quoted in Spivack, p. 93.   [158]*Tide*, p. 342.

[159]*Money*, pp. 433, 436.   [160]Quoted in Cushman, p. 121.

[161]*Cambyses*, p. 176.   [162]*Wisdom*, in Eccles, p. 143.

mantyll of the sowll seven small boys in the lyknes of dewyllys and so retorne ageyn."[163] After repentance, Anima is blessed by Wisdom (Christ): "Now be ye reformyde to yowr bewtys bryght."[164] But references to these visual effects are not abundant. There are, in fact, indications that many of the vices were pleasing in appearance, as is the case with the vices in *Hickscorner*, who appear as fine gentlemen.[165]

This apparent discrepancy between practice and aesthetic theory is actually a subtlety and is explainable in terms of both the medium of expression and the nature of the character being expressed. Dramatic art is visual as well as linguistic. When a character can be developed through his language and his physical appearance, he may use one to alter, accentuate, or draw attention away from the other. And when the character has a dual nature, such flexibility can be used to his great advantage. Thus, vices do not necessarily have to be physically distorted: They use their verbal persuasiveness and sometimes goodly countenances as means of deceiving people about their essentially evil nature. Instances of this tendency are implicit in the fact that the vices often change their names to facilitate a ruse. Hypocrisy, in *The Conflict of Conscience*, addresses one of his comrades as follows:

> But your name, Tyranny, I fear all will mar:
> Let me alone and I will invent
> A name to your nature, which shall be convenient.
> Zeal shall your name be.[166]

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[163] *Wisdom*, p. 144.   [164] Ibid., p. 149.   [165] *Hickscorner*, p. 154.

[166] *Conflict*, p. 62.

Similar situations are found in other plays. The Devil in *Lusty Juventus* changes the name of Hypocrisy to Friendship in an attempt to ensnare Juventus.[167] In *Nature*, Pride becomes Worship,[168] while Avarice becomes Policie in *Respublica*.[169] And Infidelity of *Mary Magdelene* becomes Prudence.[170] The vice, then, is a schemer. He is ugly, but the ugliness can assume forms not readily discernible to the eye. He works in covert ways to pull man away from the influence of the good and thus to insure his damnation.

We are left, then, with a paradoxical situation in which characters who exemplify evil and consciously and treacherously seek the downfall of man--and who, as such, are objects of fear--are treated in a humorous and, in some ways, appealing manner. Attempts at justifying these conflicting impulses are found in several of the plays. In the prologue to *Like Will to Like*, the intention of the author is made clear:

> And because divers men of divers minds be,
> Some do matters of mirth and pastime require.
> Other some are delighted with matters of gravity,
> To please all men is our author's chief desire.
> Wherefore mirth with measure to sadness is annexed:
> Desiring that none here at our matter will be perplexed.[171]

The Four Elements uses humor "to give men comfort, / And occasion to cause them to resort / To hear this matter."[172] Similar pronouncements are made in other plays, particularly *The Trial of Treasure* and *Virtuous and Godly Susanna*.[173] Undoubtedly these statements go far toward explaining the

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[167]*Juventus*, pp. 68, 71.   [168]Quoted in Cushman, p. 134.

[169]*Respublica*, in Schell, p. 240.   [170]Quoted in Cushman, p. 134.

[171]*Will*, p. 308.   [172]*Elements*, p. 10.

[173]Quoted in Spivack, p. 116.

conflicting tendencies of the plays, but not far enough. It must be remembered that the authors of the moralities were writing in a conventional form which they simultaneously inherited and helped to shape and that the Vice, with all his humor and horror, was a major part of that convention. Thus, to understand more clearly the complex nature of these characters, we must look to the convention itself; that is, we must briefly consider the origins of the Vice and the specific nature of the fear and the laughter he evoked.

L. W. Cushman has convincingly demonstrated that the vices originated from the concept of the Seven Deadly Sins,[174] which were in turn the products of the belief in the devil. Cushman cites evidence from the plays that supports a direct connection between the concept of the Sins and the vices. For example, the vices in *The Castle of Perseverance* are named for the Seven Deadly Sins and are shown to be children of the devil. In *The World and the Child*, Folly is the chief vice, but he is described as something more:

> Sire, it is Pride, Wrath, and Envy,
> Sloth, Covetise and Gluttony,
> Lechery the seventh is,
> These seven sins I call Folly.[175]

And Sin, the major vice of *All for Money*, tells the minor vices, "as either of you contain one sin particularly, even so I contain all sins generally."[176] The reasons for concentrating the sins into one major vice can be found in the limits imposed by the stage, which would become quite crowded with so many vice figures, and by the narrowing purposes

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[174]Cushman, p. 62.   [175]Ibid.   [176]Ibid.

of the later moralities, which tended to concentrate on one particular aspect of the temptation of humanity, rather than to treat life as a whole.

This idea of the origin of the vice figure becomes important in light of statements made by some modern scholars who would rob him of both his reality and his ability to inspire fear. Bernard Spivack, in what is otherwise an excellent study of these plays, is mistaken when he says that

> In his typical role in the moralities proper [the Vice] is fundamentally, beneath his human features and habiliments, a moral personification. That is to say, he is neither moral nor a person, only a homiletic formula.[177]

A similar error is made by Robert Withington, who claims that "Fear was surely not one of the emotions with which the public regarded the Vice of the moralities."[178] We may answer both of these arguments by referring to the highly imaginative nature of the medieval minds to which the distinction between idea and reality was often blurred. To Spivack, we may oppose Roy W. MacKenzie, who says:

> It is obviously unfair to dismiss the *dramatis personae* of the Moralities as a set of dreary abstractions, going through a series of lifeless dialogues merely to bring out a moral. They could not have been dreary abstractions to the people who saw them on the stage, or, needless to say, they would not have appeared in play after play for more than 200 years.[179]

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[177]Spivack, p. 195.

[178]Robert Withington, "The Development of the 'Vice,'" in *Essays in Memory of Barrett Wendell* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1926), p. 160.

[179]W. Roy MacKenzie, *The English Moralities from the Point of View of Allegory*, Harvard Studies in English, Vol. 2 (1914; rpt. New York: Gordian Press, 1966), p. 261.

To Withington, we may oppose Morton Bloomfield, who says:

> Medieval man was fascinated, as we are, by the [Seven Deadly] Sins, but, more than that, he believed in them. For most men in the Middle Ages, the sins were as real as the parish church itself, and readily entered into everyday life.[180]

In these last two statements, we begin to get a clearer idea of the reality of and the fear inspired by the Vice. He represented sin; sin represented damnation. These concepts were not, however, merely abstractions--they strutted across the stage, corrupting mankind while pretending to be his friend. But they also represented the same forces which strutted in real life. MacKenzie says that the "morality playwright was sensible enough to realize that Vice is not always a monster of frightful mien, but that he frequently appears as a very amusing and companionable creature."[181] Vice was not a one-dimensional formula. In fact, if there was a vibrant figure in any of the plays, it was the vice, rather than the virtue whose eyes were constantly looking upward, or the naive human figure who was passively pulled by one or the other of the forces. The moralities, then, represented more than just ethical battles waged within the soul of man. What the people of the Middle Ages saw when they looked at the vice was not just an abstract idea. It was an image of their own world--but their own world gone awry through the influence of sin. A character named Lechery was to them a real being, but one, like the "metamorphosed man" that we discussed earlier, who was perverted by sin, which in this case took the form of an over-awareness of the sensual side of life. This awareness distracted him from eternals

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[180]Bloomfield, p. xiv.   [181]MacKenzie, p. 266.

and insured both his own damnation and that of any who would follow him. It was precisely to the extent that the vice was perceived as a real being--one capable of interacting with and contaminating others--that he became an object of fear. For fear is not intellectual. So long as a concept remains purely on the level of ideas, its effects upon us are limited. We do not fear death, for instance, in the abstract; it is only as we see it working in the world around us that we truly realize its terror. The same applies to vice, which is impotent until it is manifested in the flesh. Until we can see one like ourselves who has been caught in the snare, we cannot fully appreciate the danger.

The fear engendered by the Vice is, then, understandable in psychological terms, but its implications broaden as the fear intersects the laughter to form the grotesque effect. On one level, we can see the laughter as a direct outgrowth of the fear, as a type of defense mechanism which is employed in the presence of something unsettling or little understood. Laughter in this sense becomes diversionary, a way of attempting to avoid what would otherwise be unpleasant by changing the tone or by gaining an intellectual distance from the object of fear. As Wolfgang Kayser says, it is "the kind of laughter that is an involuntary response to situations that cannot be handled in any other way."[182] In addition to this nervous laughter, there are elements of classical laughter as defined by Henri Bergson, who sees laughter as a sort of social weapon used against "a certain rigidity of body, mind and character that society

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[182]Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1963), p. 287.

would still like to get rid of in order to obtain from its members the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability."[183]   The Vice is limited; that is, he cannot meet life adequately because one element of his existence dominates the rest of his character and pulls him toward damnation. Be he ever so witty, or lewd, or sporting, or free and merry, he is a social aberration and, as such, he becomes the object of social ridicule. Bergson sums up the effect well as he says:

> Society holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which, although it is slight, is none the less dreaded. Such must be the function of laughter. Always rather humiliating for the one against whom it is directed, laughter is really and truly a kind of social ragging.[184]

We can now glimpse the complexity of the medieval grotesque. In the implicit association of evil and ugliness in the works of the early Christian philosophers, we saw that as evil, ugliness represented irrationality and cosmic chaos. In the highly volatile and superstitious nature of the popular imagination, we saw the extremes to which naive religious faith could be taken and the very strange fruit which it oftentimes bore. But we also saw a lighter side of medieval life, a sense of play which served to moderate the severe formality of Christian officialdom and mingled with the serious moral issues of salvation to produce the perplexing marginal and sculptural figures of grotesque art. And from the drama, we were able to gain a clearer understanding of the specific nature of the fear and the laughter which are the elements of the grotesque effect. The fear was the same that served as the prime

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[183]Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1917), p. 21.

[184]Ibid., p. 135.

motivation of life in the Middle Ages--the threat of damnation. The laughter was evoked by vulgarity, by gaiety, by freedom and irresponsibility, but it was ultimately associated with this same fear and was used as a means of correcting social deviation. The effect is, then, philosophical, psychological, and social in its implications.

Although our literary treatment has thus far been limited to the vice, we will not have to search far to find other literary grotesques. The mystery plays, another popular form of the drama, are packed with comic characters. Edwin J. Best, in an unpublished thesis entitled "The Comic Element in the English Mystery Plays,"[185] finds in these plays at least thirty-four comic character types, fully half of which are directly associated with evil. Among others, there are the Egyptian Pharoahs, Cain, Annas, Caiaphas, Pilate, and Herod, but one of the more interesting is the devil himself. Although Cushman is careful to point out that the comic devil scenes in the mysteries are later interpolations,[186] the fact that such additions were made is evidence of the great popular appeal of this colorful character. Besides being extremely ugly--the typical stage direction describes him as entering "in the most orryble wyse"[187]--the devil is full of comic blustering. As John B. Moore says:

> The devils that specialize in roaring and bellowing are ever
> the same. Audiences had evidently formed the habit of
> laughing at them, for they were introduced over and over

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[185]Edwin J. Best, "The Comic Element in the English Mystery Plays," Honor's Thesis Maryville College, 1936.

[186]Cushman, p. 16.

[187]*Ludus Coventriae*, "Trial before Herod," quoted by Best, p. 75.

again . . . . [We] must conclude that the spectators preferred their devils served roaring.[188]

And roar the devil did, as is evident from his typical entrance. He pushes the audience aside and comically abuses them:

> Make room be-lyve, and late me gang,
> Who makis here all this thrang?
> High you hense! high myght you hang
> right with a rope.[189]

He wrestles with his cohorts and brags: "Now I, pryse pyrked prykked in pryde, satan ower sovereyn, set with every circumstance."[190] He is even often lewd, as he bids farewell to the audience:

> I goe to make my testatment:
> to all that in this place be lent,
> I bequeath the shitte.[191]

But beneath the comedy, his true nature lurks and in this nature is danger:

> Warr! warr! for now unwarly makes you woe!
> for I am swifter than the doe.
> I am common to fetch this lord you froe
> in woe ever to dwell.[192]

Of a similar nature are some of the creatures which inhabit the dreamland of *Piers Plowman*, particularly Gluttony and Sloth, two of the Seven Deadly Sins moved to confession by the impassioned plea of Repentance. A hearty laugh was most surely evoked by the following

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[188]John B. Moore, *The Comic and the Realistic in English Drama* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1925), p. 12.

[189]*York Plays*, "The Smythis," quoted by Best, p. 70.

[190]*Digby Plays*, "Mary Magdalene," quoted by Best, p. 78.

[191]*Chester Plays*, "Temptation," quoted by Best, p. 70.

[192]*Chester Plays*, "Slaying of Innocents," quoted by Best, p. 68.

description of Gluttony, who had characteristically overindulged:

> Hise guttes bigonne to gothelen as two gredy sowes;
> He pissed a potel in a paternoster while,
> And blew [the] rounde ruwet at [the] ruggebones ende
> That all that herde that horn helde hir nos[e] after [193]
> And wisshed it hadde ben wexed with a wispe of firses.

The same character is later seen as he "koughed yp a cawdel"[194] in the lap of one of his friends. Likewise we have the humorous description of Sloth "al bislabered with two slymy eiyen."[195] But here again, this humor is tempered, as Sloth shows his essentially deceptive nature by saying, "My tonge is two myle from my herte."[196]

Similar deception is seen in several of Chaucer's Pilgrims. Beneath the surface of the "double worstede semycope" and the "Englissh sweete upon his tonge,"[197] Chaucer's Friar embodied all that had gone wrong with official Christendom; he was "a wantowne and a merye"[198] in an occupation that demanded chastity and spirituality. His story of the devilish Summoner is no doubt funny, but the Friar is, in essence, despicable and dangerous. The same may be said about the Pardoner and the Summoner, whose gay rendition of "Com hider, love, to me!"[199] was a sure source of amusement. Unlike the Friar, however, these two were not

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[193] George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, ed., *Piers Plowman: The B Version* (London: Athlone Press, 1975), pp. 327-28.

[194] Ibid., p. 328.   [195] Ibid., p. 330.   [196] Ibid., p. 331.

[197] Geoffrey Chaucer, "General Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. John H. Fisher (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1977), p. 14.

[198] Ibid., p. 13.   [199] Ibid., p. 21.

pleasant. The Summoner had "scalled browes blake and piled berd. / Of his visage children were aferd,"[200] and his breath reeked of onions, garlic, and leeks. He is humorous in his retaliatory tale of a dim-witted and greedy friar, but he is totally corrupt as he overindulges in wine and accepts bribes for overlooking damnable sins. The epitome of such deception is, however, the Pardoner, who becomes the object of Chaucer's sharpest ridicule. His beardless face and questionable sexual proclivities are but surface manifestations of an all-encompassing degradation which the Pardoner reveals with amazing clarity in the Prologue to his tale. His false smiles and worthless relics may be humorous on the level of caricature, but let no one mistake his real nature, for there lay evil.

Defining the grotesque is a difficult problem, and we have not succeeded fully in solving it, but we have learned something of the thematic function which the grotesque elements serve, and this function is one of contrasts. For every vice, there was a corresponding virtue; for every Gluttony, a Temperance; for every Friar or Summoner or Pardoner, a Parson. The duality of Good and Evil, which we first discerned in our study of Plato, assumed unusual forms as it passed through the minds of medieval man, who lived in a world of ever-present death and profound ignorance of natural law and for whom the issues of salvation and damnation were of utmost concern. A. W. Ward is right when he says that "our [English] literature had more distinctly than that of any other modern nation a specifically Christian origin."[201] And the

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[200]Chaucer, p. 21.

[201]Adolphus William Ward, *A History of English Dramatic Literature to the Death of Queen Anne*, Vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1899), p. 102.

peculiar quality of the Christian mind was the source of our concept of the grotesque. The Christian Good, as we have seen, was intellectual and other-worldly. If artistic embodiments of this force were wooden, it is because the Good was, in this fallen world, practically unattainable. Evil, on the other hand, was not intellectual. It was sensual and emotional, and as it moved through the world, it constantly changed its outward forms while retaining its destructive essence. It was the negation of the Good but not in the same way that black is the negation of white, for attempts at embodying it in art could never be flat and colorless. Medieval man could not disregard the inherent attractiveness of living in the world as it was perceived through his senses; try as he might, he could not keep his eyes fixed constantly on the heavens. His response to Evil was ambivalent, and this ambivalence is captured and preserved in his grotesque art and literature.

SOME MODERN ADAPTIONS OF THE GROTESQUE

> To a man devoid of blinders, there
> is no finer sight than that of the
> intelligence at grips with a reality
> that transcends it.
>> Albert Camus
>> *The Myth of Sisyphus*

The temporal leap from the Middle Ages to the modern period is small in comparison to the conceptual one. We have seen that, despite the diversity and tension of thought and actions, at the center of the medieval universe sat an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent God. The proper symbol for such a world-view is the Gothic cathedral, strong, graceful, solemn, and enduring. It housed all elements of life, from the most solemn funeral mass to the most boisterous festival. Its graceful spires pointed upwards and revealed to man that the real meaning of his existence was not to be found in the sensual, irrational world around him but that he must look to the world beyond this one to find the beauty, peace, and permanence for which he longed. Its portals were decorated with didactic figures illustrating the joys of a life rightly lived and the horrors of an existence gone wrong. And its massive stillness reminded man simultaneously of his individual insignificance and his glorious potential. The differences between such a view and that of the modern world are in many ways obvious, but we can bring the problem into sharper focus by looking at a selection from *Watt*, a novel by Samuel Beckett. The passage describes certain outings taken by Watt, the

character, and Beckett's mysterious narrator:

> Birds of every kind abounded, and these it was our delight
> to pursue, with stones and clods of earth. Robins, in
> particular, thanks to their confidingness, we destroyed
> in great numbers. And larks' nests, laden with eggs still
> warm from the mother's breast, we ground into fragments,
> under our feet, with peculiar satisfaction, at the
> appropriate season of the year.
> But our particular friends were the rats, that dwelt
> by the stream. They were long and black . . . they would
> come flocking round us at our approach, with every sign of
> affection, and glide up our trouserlegs, and hang upon our
> breasts. And then we would sit down in the midst of them,
> and give them to eat, out of our hands, of a nice fat frog,
> or a baby thrush. Or seizing suddenly a plump young rat,
> resting in our bosom after its repast, we would feed it to
> its mother, or its father, or its brother, or its sister,
> or to some less fortunate relative.
> It was on these occasions, we agreed, after an exchange
> of views, that we came nearest to God.[1]

What structure might modern man erect to house so grotesque a

God--indeed so grotesque a world--as that envisioned by Beckett and

other modern writers? And what are the implications for the literature

of the grotesque? These questions are complex, as must surely be their

answers, and it is the purpose of this chapter to deal with them. To

proceed, we will temporarily leave Beckett aside and look briefly at

some of the dominant philosophical, psychological, and social forces

which have shaped our modern world. With this background we will turn

to an investigation of the grotesque techniques of several modern

writers--William Faulkner; Flannery O'Connor; Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.; Peter

Shaffer; and Samuel Beckett--and the relationship of the grotesque to

their major themes. In this investigation it will be useful to keep in

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[1]Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (1953; rpt. New York: Grove Press, 1959),
pp. 155-56. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *W* and page number.

mind our analogy with the medieval cathedral, for in some ways it can be said that modern writers have dismantled, virtually stone by stone, the all-encompassing edifice of medieval Christendom and reconstructed of it something radically new. However--and this is equally significant-- the building blocks are the same and so is the mortar which gives them coherence. For modern writers, like their medieval counterparts, deal with the whole range of human concerns--God, rationality, irrationality, love, hate, rigidity, fears, hopes, laughter, on and on. And their writings are held together by an abiding interest in man's relationship to his world, in man's adjustment to life as he conceives it. New configurations are formed as conceptions change, but the concerns are permanent. In this permanence lies the key to the thematic significance of the grotesque in our literature.

The cornerstone, indeed the entire foundation of the medieval world, was undermined in the late nineteenth century, by, among others, that profound but perverse German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. "Where has God gone?" cries the madman in *The Gay Science*, "I shall tell you. *We have killed him--you and I* . . . What are these churches now if they are not tombs and sepulchres of God?"[2] Nietzsche was a radical individualist who saw Christianity as a dangerous force which promoted uniformity instead of encouraging individuality. He felt that after breaking out of the confines of Christian dogma, man would be free to realize the unique beauty of his own life and to build from it a more meaningful existence.

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[2]Frederick Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), pp. 181-82.

But the madman is shunned by his listeners and realizes correctly that "his time has not yet come. The tremendous event is still on its way, still traveling--it has not yet reached the ears of men."[3] This statement can be considered prophetic since, even though few in Nietzsche's time realized its significance, the news of the death of God did arrive to be greeted by men like Albert Camus and thus to become one of the bases of the philosophical movement known as existentialism. In what is perhaps his central essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus recognizes that the world no longer has an absolute God to give it form and confronts the problem of the meaning of human existence within such a world, which he calls "absurd." The essay takes its title from Sisyphus, the mythical figure who was condemned by the gods

> to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. [The gods] had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.[4]

In Sisyphus, Camus saw modern man. Life in the Middle Ages was seen as a journey through the shadows of the sensual world to the reality of the world of God and its subsequent rewards. The journey was one-way; the bliss of its destination was complete. The absurd journey of modern man ends with no such reward. It is one of perpetual return and perpetual failure--the rock reaches the top of the mountain only to roll back again. And the process ends with absolute and final death, devoid of punishment and reward. As William Barrett says, "The temporal is the horizon of

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[3]Ibid., p. 182.

[4]Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 88.

modern man, as the eternal was the horizon of the man of the Middle Ages."[5] In reaching for God, man finds only himself; the universe has become man-centered.

It is the nature of the man who stands at the center of this universe that we need to examine to understand a second dominant feature of modern thought--its concern with irrationality. In the Middle Ages, as we have seen, salvation depended upon man's ability to exercise rational control over his senses and to reach for the eternal without losing himself in the natural world. But at the beginning of our age, the concept of rational consciousness was questioned, along with man's ability to control the forces which shaped his existence.

William James, among others, proposed that man's consciousness is not characterized by distinctly separate thoughts which recur intact over a period of time. Rather, he believed that consciousness is a continuous flow of ideas that are constantly modified by the circumstances in which they are perceived and by the thoughts that immediately precede and follow them. Because this process of continual flow and constant modification is an innate characteristic of the mind, James believed that "a permanently existing 'idea' . . . which makes its appearance before the footlights of consciousness at periodic intervals, is as mythological an entity as the Jack of Spades,"[6] for even the most absolute, even God, changes as the mind moves through and reacts to the world around it. There are other

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[5]William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1962), p. 53.

[6]William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, American Science Series (1890; rpt. New York: Henry Holt, 1918), I, 252.

implications of James' theory which also concern us. To exercise rational control over our lives, we must be able to stand, albeit momentarily, outside of the stream of consciousness and assess the relative value of our thoughts and actions. Such objectivity is, however, impossible. James explains the attempt at introspection as follows:

> The rush of thought is so headlong that it almost always brings us up at the conclusion before we can arrest it. Or if our purpose is nimble enough and we do arrest it, it ceases forthwith to be itself. As a snowflake crystal caught in the warm hand is no longer a crystal but a drop, so, instead of catching the feeling of relation moving to its term, we find we have caught some substantive thing, usually the last word we were pronouncing, statically taken, and with its function, tendency, and particular meaning in the sentence quite evaporated. The attempt at introspective analysis in these cases is in fact like seizing a spinning top to catch its motion, or trying to turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks.[7]

Thus, unlike its medieval counterpart, the modern mind can neither comprehend absolute, unchanging ideas nor adequately arrest and analyze its protean thoughts.

There are other forces working inside and outside the mind which further complicate our traditional concept of rationality. In an intriguing series of works, Sigmund Freud argued that there are forces below the level of conscious thought which exercise control over our lives. Dividing mental processes into the categories of preconscious, unconscious, and conscious, Freud saw actions as resulting from the interplay of the three main divisions of the psyche: the id, "a chaos, a cauldron of seething excitement"[8] that has neither unity nor organization and works

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[7]Ibid., p.

[8]Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. W. J. H. Sprott (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), pp. 104-5.

solely in accordance with the pleasure principle; the ego, the mediator

for perceptions of the outer world and the generator of the "phenomenon

of consciousness";[9] and the super-ego, the enforcer of "certain norms of

behavior, without regard to any difficulties coming from the id and the

external world."[10] Freud saw the interaction of these psychic entities

in terms of a battle reminiscent in some ways of the medieval *Psychomachia*:

> . . . goaded on by the id, hemmed in by the super-ego, and
> rebuffed by reality, the ego struggles to cope with its
> economic task of reducing the forces and influences which
> work in it and upon it to some kind of harmony . . . . When
> the ego is forced to acknowledge its weakness, it breaks out
> into anxiety: reality anxiety in the face of the external
> world, normal anxiety in the face of the super-ego, and
> neurotic anxiety in the face of the strength of the passions
> of the id.[11]

Since most of the participants in this battle are not, like their medieval

counterparts, on the conscious level, we are unable fully to control

them--without knowing why, we become anxiety-stricken victims of the

severity of the super-ego, or we surrender to the neuroses of the sensual

wilderness of the id. In addition to these innate forces, Freud sees

other, more socially oriented forces as significant in shaping our lives.

The relationship between children and parents, between siblings competing

for parental attention, or between the desires of the individual and those

acceptable to society--all are influential forces over which we can

exercise little control. Although there is much that is objectionable in

Freud's theories, they are significant in that they cast further doubt on

the rational nature of the mind as it had been traditionally conceived.

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[9]Freud, p. 105.   [10]Ibid., p. 106.

[11]Ibid.

Other thinkers tell us that in addition to these psychic and social forces, our lives are shaped by natural and economic forces. In a revelation that jolted the scientific and religious communities, Charles Darwin, with disconcertingly convincing logic, showed that man was not necessarily the being whom God had "created in his own image" (Gen. 1:27) and given "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the foul of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth over the earth" (Gen. 1:26). Rather Darwin believed that man is himself an animal that has "descended from a hairy, tailed quadruped, probably arboreal in its habits, and an inhabitant of the Old World"[12] and that the process by which this evolution was achieved was one of a blind struggle in which the stronger, more adaptable members of a species were selected for survival for purely natural reasons, while the weaker perished. Darwin thus deflated man's greatly exaggerated image of himself by showing that he was subject to the natural forces of the world--like any other animal--and that these forces overshadow his own pitiful efforts: "How fleeting are the wishes and effects of man!" he says in *The Origin of Species*; "How short his time! and consequently how poor will be his results, compared with those accumulated by Nature during whole geological periods."[13]

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[12]Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, in *The Origin of Species and The Descent of Man* (New York: Random House, n.d.), p. 911.

[13]Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, in *The Origin of Species and The Descent of Man* (New York: Random House, n.d.), p. 66.

There were other forces at work at the beginning of the modern age to alter man's perception of the meaning of his life in the world. Karl Marx saw history as the product of vast economic movements and industrialization as a force which alienates man from his work and ultimately from himself. In addition, scientists began seeing both the world and the human mind in increasingly mechanistic terms. All of these influences and their numerous implications have been felt with particular intensity by modern writers. After all, man has not only been cut off from his God and his innermost psychic processes, but he is pushed around by social and economic forces he cannot control. He is left drifting in an incomprehensible world with no hope of an afterlife, and he can no longer depend upon his own mind to get him rationally through his life. Although existence has not, as some pessimists might say, been reduced to "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," we are safe in assuming that what it does signify must be understood in a different way.

In these intellectual developments are several important implications for our study of the grotesque. In keeping with the modern concern with the nature of consciousness, the modern grotesque is created more in psychological than in physical terms. Physical deformity, though still used often with powerful results, is subordinated to psychological deformity; insanity or idiocy becomes the focus of attention and the principal means of creating the estranged world. Another important change which concerns us here is the fragmentation of the world-view resulting

from these new ideas. In the Middle Ages we saw the grotesque in terms
of the contrast between good and evil. Such a simple correlation was
possible, despite the intrusion of the irrational, because the world was
seen in basically dualistic terms. No matter how attractive the Vice of
the medieval morality play may occasionally have been, there could be
little mistake about his essentially evil nature. And no matter how
irrational some of the beliefs of the Middle Ages may seem, this irra-
tionality was ultimately subordinated to the rationality of God's ordered
universe. With the advent of nineteenth and twentieth century ideas,
however, irrationality came out of its closet as God tumbled from the
heavens, and the world can no longer be viewed in the simple dualistic
terms of good and evil. Values have become relative; morality now depends
more on one's constantly shifting perspective than on any particular
dogmatic scheme. And the "norm" which so conveniently helped us to define
the thematic function of the grotesque has likewise become relative. We
may no longer hold up one particular viewpoint as the "correct" one and
use it as a measure of divergent views; we must instead allow each writer
to define the norm in his own terms. Nor may we consider divergence
from the norm as a negative characteristic, for as we will see, some
moderns see normality in essentially negative terms and invest abnormality
with positive characteristics.

　　We may, however, view the modern grotesque as similar to its
medieval counterpart in *thematic function* even though the context and
implications of this function may be radically different. The grotesque
still functions as a negation, and as such it is still a powerful means
of disorienting an audience. The difference lies, in many cases, in the

writer's attitude toward what he is negating by the use of the grotesque. In the Middle Ages, this attitude was fairly consistent. Medieval audiences, as we have seen, were predisposed to see goodness as beauty and harmony, and evil as ugliness and discord, and their artists used discord, in the form of grotesquerie, to inspire in them fears of damnation. In this use we see the origin of a tradition which is still meaningful today, for we still think of harmony as positive and discord as negative, even though our conceptions of good and evil have changed radically and ceased to be our main focus of concern. Modern writers, in their world of shifting values, are not bound by the tradition. They may, of course, use it and gain powerful effects by opposing a "beauty" to a "grotesque" as a means of advancing the attributes of the former while deprecating those of the latter. In fact, we shall see that William Faulkner, perhaps the greatest fiction writer of the twentieth century, uses this technique. But the modern writer can also effect an inversion of the expectations created by this tradition and gain extremely powerful effects, for at bottom such a technique involves a double inversion. The simple presence of a grotesque, as we have seen, causes surprise as it estranges us from our everyday world--this is the source of its original power. If, however, the writer invests this grotesque with positive characteristics, relative to what is being negated--to the norm, in other words--he can invert the inversion and increase the effect of the dis-orientation. In so doing he can force the reader into a radical re-evaluation of his world as he presently understands it. This complex effect will become clearer as we see it used, in differing degrees and modes, by O'Connor, Vonnegut, Shaffer, and Beckett.

Jean-Paul Sartre notes perceptively that the reader who tries to summarize the events of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* realizes that "he is telling another story."[14] This fiction does not follow a conventional pattern, and to impose such a pattern upon it changes it fundamentally. Just as experience fails to conform to a neat sequence of situation-complication-climax-unraveling, Faulkner's fiction sprawls, turns back upon itself endlessly. It is rambling in form, lush in style, and ambitious in scope. It is in some ways incomprehensible, but it is great in that it captures the rhythms of life. The past flows almost imperceptibly into the present, distorts it or clarifies it, shapes the future, and then recedes into obscurity. Thoughts cut across one another as the mind tries in vain to form of experience a logical sequence. Infinite sensations bombard his characters from the immediate environment, but no two characters react to these sensations in the same way. Faulkner does not hand us ideas; rather, he plants them in our minds, and because they are living things, they grow and with proper care bear fruit. His technique is new and unique--his form mirrors life in all its richness--but underlying it is a belief that is, by his own admission, far from new and unique. In accepting the Nobel Prize, Faulkner asserted that today's writer must seek "the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed--love and honor and pity and pride and compassion

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[14]Jean-Paul Sartre, "Time in Faulkner: *The Sound and the Fury*," in *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*, eds. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1960), p. 226.

and sacrifice."[15] His repeated use of the coordinating conjunction "and" is significant, for it shows that he is willing neither to let one of the "verities" overshadow the others nor to choose one to the exclusion of the others. His concern with inclusiveness is, then, reflected in his themes; just as the form of a Faulkner novel is distorted by the imposition of an arbitrary literary pattern, Faulkner would say that the imposition of a pattern upon life--a pattern that would ignore the multiplicity of human experience--distorts life, makes of it "another story." It is this kind of distortion that defines Faulkner's grotesques, for they, like the Vice of the morality plays, are seen as characters who allow one element of their existence to "pattern" their lives and to rob them of the flexibility necessary for adequate adjustment and fulfillment of life. Faulkner eschews concepts and institutions which try to fix human reactions. He offers no simple ideal but merely wants to open up both the head and the heart, so that the individual will be willing to learn what life is willing to teach. Olga Vickery states it best:

> In order to avoid a complete falsification of reality and a distortion of truth, the individual must continually readjust his thinking in the light of his everincreasing and ever-changing experience. Faulkner's doomed characters are those who lack the necessary flexibility and resilience to admit and mend their errors in perception.[16]

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[15]William Faulkner, "The Stockholm Address," in *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*, eds. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1960), p. 348.

[16]Olga W. Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1959), p. 225.

Three such doomed characters are the Compson brothers, the
principal narrators of Faulkner's masterpiece, *The Sound and The Fury*.
The most obviously distorted is the idiot Benjy, the first narrator.
Originally named Maury after his mother's proud but ineffectual brother,
Benjy was renamed and castrated when the extent of his mental incompetence
was realized. He is thirty-three--or as one of his young playmates says,
"he been three years old thirty years"[17]--but he cannot speak, nor can he
distinguish between past and present. Time to Benjy is a continuous
present in which are suspended events which span his entire life, and
this temporal disorientation explains the disconnectedness of the first
section of the novel. Events pass through his mind uninterpreted; since
Benjy does not have the mental ability to integrate these events into a
coherent picture, he presents the reader with facts apprehended as pure
sensation. He is thus a victim of his senses, particularly of sight,
smell, and sound, and this limitation makes him a grotesque. This
is not to say that Benjy is a despicable character; he is in fact a
sympathetic one to whom we cannot fail to respond. He is, for instance,
capable of feeling love and of sensing its loss. The center of his
existence is Caddy, his only sister and the only member of the family
genuinely to love and care for him. But Benjy realizes her love through
his sensations rather than through the abstractions we associate with
concepts like love. To Benjy, Caddy smells "like trees in the rain"
(*SF*. 38)--she is fresh and green and innocent. When she puts on perfume,

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[17]William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, in *The Sound and the
Fury and As I Lay Dying* (New York: Random House, The Modern Library,
1946), p. 36. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *SF* and page number.

an indication of her inevitable loss of innocence and subsequent

departure from the household, Benjy senses the difference in smell and

starts an inarticulate bellowing which is stopped only when Caddy removes

the perfume. His response is similar when he stands in front of a mirror

and senses the effects of his castration; here he takes on tragic

proportions. Sympathy is only one of the reactions which Benjy evokes.

There is, for instance, our discomfort as we experience the severe dis-

orientation of following thoughts as they race through the temporal

wilderness of Benjy's mind. And we do not have to go so far as James

Mellard, who sees Benjy as standing in "the literary tradition of the

fool,"[18] to see a grim sort of humor as "the Great American Gelding"

(*SF*. 280), or the "star freshman" (*SF*. 274) of the state asylum, as Jason

calls him, is jostled around by his mischievous companion Luster, or as

he runs along the edge of the golf course which borders his home and wails

as the golfers call for their "caddies." There is even a peculiar irony

in the fact that Benjy's castration is a direct result of his attempt

to communicate with young girls who pass his house. Faulkner shows com-

passion in his treatment of Benjy, but this compassion is based upon

sympathy, not upon admiration. Benjy may be lovable, but his distortion

is also frightening and, at times, even humorous. He is a grotesque

because his mind is fixed rigidly by his senses, and he thus lacks the

necessary flexibility to adapt to the inevitable changes which life

demands. In his appendix to *The Sound and The Fury*, Faulkner says that

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[18]James M. Mellard, "Caliban as Prospero: Benjy and *The Sound and The Fury*," *Novel*, 3 (1969-70), 237.

Benjy "lost nothing" (*SF*. 19); this is true, for in essence he had nothing to lose.

Though highly articulate and intelligent, Benjy's brother Quentin is equally grotesque. If Benjy exists outside of time, Quentin is trapped within it. If Benjy cannot conceive of abstractions, Quentin cannot escape them. Quentin loves his sister Caddy and sees her as the only remaining repository of the Compson family honor which is fading in his mother's hypochondria and his father's alcoholic nihilism. When this honor is threatened by Caddy's pregnancy, Quentin is thrown into a crisis from which he is unable to recover. But "honor" is purely an abstraction; it is not an absolute, but only a "fine dead sound" (*SF*. 193). As Faulkner says, Quentin loves

> some concept of Compson honor precariously and (he well knew)
> only temporarily supported by the minute fragile membrane
> of her maidenhead as a miniature replica of all the whole
> vast globy earth may be poised on the nose of a trained seal.
> (*SF*. 9)

But Quentin cannot live in a world of such impermanence. He tries to convince his father that Caddy's pregnancy is the result of incest in an irrational attempt "to sublimate a piece of natural human folly into a horror" (*SF*. 195), a horror so great that "the world would roar away" (*SF*. 195) and leave Quentin and Caddy alone, outside of the "general truth [of] the sequence of natural events and their causes which shadows every mans brow" (*SF*. 195). In other words, Quentin places an absolute value upon honor, and when he is confronted with the relative nature of this abstraction, he attempts to replace it with the concrete horror of incest and thus to be rejected by the real world and allowed to live in the world of his own creation, a world of pure abstraction. But his enemy

is time. As it passes, the horrors of Caddy's pregnancy and of the
Compson loss of honor will diminish. Quentin's father tells him, "You
cannot bear to think that someday it will no longer hurt you like this"
(*SF*. 196). Quentin jerks the hands off his watch in a symbolic attempt
to stop the flow of time, but the watch keeps ticking and absolutes keep
fading and Quentin, unable and unwilling to adjust, keeps moving closer
to death.

The Quentin section is, as William Barrett says, "a masterpiece,
perhaps as great as anything yet written by an American."[19] This is true
not only because of Faulkner's faultless stream-of-consciousness style,
but also because of his ability to create multiple effects. The section
is first disturbing, even frightening, in that it captures so convinc-
ingly the rhythms of "the slow blind surge moving forward like an
underground river toward the sea, of a man's going to his death."[20] But
this effect is offset somewhat by the absurdly ironic humor of the events
at Harvard on the day of Quentin's suicide. Quentin, who, as Faulkner
says, "loved death above all, who loved only death, loved and lived in a
deliberate and almost perverted anticipation of death" (*SF*. 9), finds
himself almost inextricably bound up with the concerns of life. He meets
a run-away girl, and in his attempts to find her home, he is accused of
kidnapping; he has a fight with one of his college classmates for no good
reason; and, on his way to suicide, he becomes curiously concerned with
personal hygiene:

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[19]Barrett, p. 52.   [20]Ibid.

> I remembered I hadn't brushed my teeth, so I had to open
> the bag again. I found my toothbrush and got some of
> Shreve's [his roommate's] paste and went out and brushed
> my teeth . . . . Before I snapped the light out I looked
> around to see if there was anything else, then I saw that
> I had forgotten my hat . . . . I had forgotten to brush
> it too, but Shreve had a brush, so I didn't have to open
> the bag anymore. (*SF*. 197)

With sparkling teeth and a newly brushed hat, Quentin Compson walks off

into the river with flat-irons on his feet, never to return. He takes

his place among Faulkner's grotesques because of his inability to

adapt to the continual flux of life.

Jason, the last of the Compson brothers, is also grotesque, for

he sees life in purely economic terms. He is bitter because of dis-

appointment over a bank position which he is promised but which he fails

to get when Caddy's pregnancy becomes known. To gain revenge, he

systematically steals from Caddy by keeping for himself the money which

Caddy sends to care for her daughter, Miss Quentin, whom Jason abuses

with constant bickering and invasion of privacy. The extent of Jason's

bitterness toward the world is seen as he burns two carnival tickets

rather than give them to Luster, who has lost his only quarter and now

cannot afford to go to the carnival. Jason screams at his mother, at

Miss Quentin, at the Negro servants, and even at his boss. He is

despicable in many ways, but he has an ironic wit that adds an extra

dimension to his personality. For instance, he says of Quentin's

suicide, "At Harvard they teach you how to swim at night without knowing

how to swim" (*SF*. 213). Of Benjy, he quips, "Rent him out to a sideshow;

there must be folks somewhere that would pay a dime to see him" (*SF*. 214).

Nor does his father's alcoholism escape his acid tongue: "If he had to

sell something to send Quentin to Harvard we'd all be a damn sight better off if he'd sold that sideboard and bought himself a one-armed strait jacket with the money" (*SF*. 215). Like Benjy and Quentin, Jason is grotesque in his limited ability to adapt to life, but his situation is caused by an overly cynical realism. Cleanth Brooks says that "Jason acts--or attempts to act--on the assumption of pure selfishness,"[21] but perhaps more to the point is Olga Vickery's summation:

> It is [Jason's] very insistence on facing facts that causes his distorted view of Caddy, his family, and the whole human race. He cannot imagine that there might be other facts, other aspects of the situation, than the ones that directly affect him; as a result, he sees certain things so clearly that others escape him. In the process logic replaces truth, and law, justice . . . . In short, his is a world reduced to calculation in which no subjective claims are tolerated and no margin for error allowed.[22]

Our picture of Faulkner's world would, if we were left with only these three characters, bear out Mr. Compson's belief that "all men are just accumulations dolls stuffed with sawdust swept up from the trash heaps where all previous dolls had been thrown away" (*SF*. 194), for none of the Compson brothers builds a meaningful existence. Opposed to these grotesques--"each trapped by varying degrees of isolation,"[23] as Michael H. Cowan says--is Dilsey, the Negro servant who functions as the "ethical norm"[24] of the novel. She is the only one who holds the family together.

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[21]Cleanth Brooks, "Primitivism in *The Sound and The Fury*," in *English Institute Essays, 1952*, ed. Alan S. Downer (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1954), p. 17.

[22]Vickery, p. 43.

[23]Michael H. Cowan, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Sound and The Fury* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 5.

[24]Vickery, p. 47.

She can deal with Mrs. Compson's complaints, care for Benjy when her worthless son Luster is slack in his duties, start her own fire, fill her own woodbox, extend genuine warmth of feeling to Miss Quentin, whom everyone else mistreats, and even stand up fearlessly to Jason and rebuke him for his inhumanity. "I've seen de first en de last," says Dilsey; "I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin" (*SF*. 315). As others crumble under the weight of their own particular obsessions, Dilsey faces life with stoic acceptance--"I does de bes I kin" (*SF*. 315)--and becomes, as Brooks says, the only one "who manages to maintain wholeness and thus full humanity."[25] Though some will argue that it is Benjy, as much as Dilsey, who holds Faulkner's deepest sympathy, Brooks is accurate in seeing that "Dilsey is no idiot, and if Benjy serves to point up Quentin's despair and Jason's inhumanity, this novel is *no* glorification of idiocy and *no* statement of nihilistic despair."[26]

We see, then, that Faulkner uses the grotesque as a means of defining by negation his ideal view of man. In this pattern we see affinities with the medieval moralists. Like modern-day Vices, Benjy, Quentin, and Jason live unsuccessfully because one element of their existence has choked all others. And like "Virtue," Dilsey shows the alternative. The issues are no longer seen in terms of good and evil, but the strategy is the same, as is the intended result--salvation for the medievalists, endurance for Faulkner.

The grotesque functions similarly in *The Hamlet*, perhaps Faulkner's funniest novel. The poles of grotesquerie are seen in Ike and Flem

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[25]Brooks, p. 27.   [26]Ibid.

Snopes. Like Benjy, Ike is an idiot. He is caught in an almost totally romantic view of life, but the object of this romance is a cow. His feelings are so strong and so unrealistic that he can extend them to a wooden effigy after his beloved has been killed and eaten. Faulkner treats Ike sympathetically, but the disparity between the elevated prose of this section and the participants in the action makes this scene one of the funniest in literature. Equally grotesque, though in a totally different way, is Ike's cousin Flem,[27] "a froglike creature"[28] who has virtually no feeling at all. As spiritually dead as he is sexually impotent, Flem is obsessed with money. He systematically and ruthlessly takes control of all the Varners' financial holdings, even to the point of charging Will Varner for his own tobacco, and he participates in the sale of "spotted horses" to his neighbors, even though he makes them miserable in doing so. Opposed to the Snopeses, however, Faulkner presents V. K. Ratliff, whom one scholar calls "Faulkner's model of earthly realism."[29] Essentially an observer, Ratliff comments humorously on the follies of his neighbors but refuses to stand between them and the natural consequences of their actions, as he makes clear by his refusal to interfere with the sale of the horses. Ratliff is not perfect--in fact, he is tricked into buying worthless land from the wily Flem--but he

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[27] For a complete treatment of Flem see Lewis A. Lawson, "The Grotesque-Comic in The Snopes Trilogy," *Literature and Psychology*, 15 (1965), 107-119.

[28] William Faulkner, *The Hamlet* (New York: Random House, 1940), p. 149.

[29] Lawson, p. 118.

adjusts quickly to the world and learns from his mistakes. And, in his role as "the conscience of the novel,"[30] Ratliff provides a "sweet reasonableness,"[31] a pleasant alternative to Ike's romantic blindness and Flem's materialistic obsession.

We see a similar pattern in *As I Lay Dying*, the story of the Bundren family's incredible journey to bury their dead and decaying mother. From Anse's initial reaction to his wife's death--"Now I can get them teeth"[32]--to his appearance with his new wife, "a duck-shaped woman"[33] with a phonograph, the journey is, as Vickery says, a combination "of seriousness which reaches toward tragedy and of humor which is practically farce."[34] Opposed to the Bundren family's selfish desires--Dewey Dell wants an abortion; Vardaman, a train; and Cash, a phonograph--we have our own expectations of the propriety of a funeral ritual and the comments of Tull and Peabody and other observers who serve as points of reference for a more rational world.

Faulkner was, as Percy Adams says, "first and last a moralist."[35] He was ultimately concerned with morality as it served to open man up to

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[30]Richard K. Cross, "The Humor of *The Hamlet*," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 12 (1967), p. 209.

[31]Charles A. Allen, "William Faulkner: Comedy and the Purpose of Humor," *Arizona Quarterly*, 14 (1960), 65.

[32]William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, in *The Sound and The Fury and As I Lay Dying* (New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1946), p. 375.

[33]Ibid., p. 531.   [34]Vickery, p. 65.

[35]Percy G. Adams, "Humor as Structure and Theme in Faulkner's Trilogy," *Wisconsin Studies in Literature*, 5 (1964), p. 212.

life. In showing Benjy, Jason, Quentin, Ike, Flem, and the whole Bundren
family with all their limitations, Faulkner was able to explore various
negative capabilities of life; in showing us more successful, humane
characters like Dilsey, who was able to affirm life in all its fullness,
and to demonstrate his faith that man will prevail "because he has a soul, a
spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."[36] Faulkner
was much too great an artist to treat his undesirable characters in a
totally negative way; instead, he showers them with what Cross calls, "a
laughter which is 'indomitable and unconquerable above even ruthless
grief.'"[37] Faulkner thus takes his place in the tradition of the
grotesque which extends directly back to the medieval moralists, who
could not suppress an affectionate smile at folly, no matter how dangerous
such levity might be.

Next among our examples of modern grotesquerie are the works of
Flannery O'Connor, another moralist. In order to understand O'Connor's
fiction, we must first understand her orientation toward the world she
portrays. "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy," she
states flatly in "The Fiction Writer and His Country"; "This means that
for me the meaning of life is centered in our redemption by Christ and
that what I see in the world I see in relation to that."[38] That this
strongly Christian view is evident in her fiction does not go unnoticed
by her literary interpreters. Robert Drake goes so far as to say that

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[36]Faulkner, "Stockholm Address," p. 348.   [37]Cross, p. 216.

[38]Flannery O'Connor. "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in
The Living Novel: A Symposium, ed. Granville Hicks (New York: Macmillan,
1957), p. 162. Hereafter "Fiction Writer."

> Jesus Christ is finally the principal character in all
> Miss O'Connor's fiction, whether offstage or, in the words
> and actions of her characters, very much on. And their
> encounter with Him is the one story she keeps telling over
> and over again.[39]

From these statements, we might surmise that Flannery O'Connor is a
conventional orthodox Christian who will, in homiletic fashion, teach us
the road to heaven. But we need only to dip into her fiction to find
that, like the road in one of her stories, this one is "hilly . . .
[with] certain washes in it and sharp curves on dangerous embankments."[40]
Christ is present in her stories, but locating Him and assessing His
thematic significance is perhaps the major concern of O'Connor critics.
It is, as we will see, the grotesque elements in her stories which create
this problem, for she gives the grotesque added ambivalence by investing
many of her distorted characters with Christ-like characteristics. As
we look at her fiction, we will see that she uses the grotesque to define
the nature of this post-lapsarian world and to point up the need for
grace in saving us from spiritual and intellectual narrowness.

An excellent case in point is O'Connor's most perfect short story,
"A Good Man is Hard to Find," in which the villain, appropriately named
The Misfit, shows definite, though somewhat perverse, affinities with
Christ. The story is surprising. A young man named Bailey leaves his
Atlanta home to take his family--his wife, mother, and three children--on

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[39]Robert Drake, *Flannery O'Connor: A Critical Essay*, Contemporary
Writers in Christian Perspectives, ed. Roderick Jellema (n.c.: William
B. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 17.

[40]Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," in *A Good Man is
Hard to Find and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955), p. 16.
Hereafter cited parenthetically by *GM* and page number.

a vacation to Florida. At the misguided suggestion of the grandmother
and the violently vocal insistence of the children, Bailey reluctantly
takes a detour which ends in disaster as they encounter The Misfit and
two other escaped convicts, who nonchalantly murder all six members of
the family. The interest of the story arises, however, as much from the
characterization as from the ingenious and surprising plot. The minor
characters are deftly drawn--Bailey is patient yet defiant in his deter-
mination to resist his mother's domination, his wife is little better
than a vegetable, and the children, at least the two who can talk, are
thoroughly obnoxious. But the central conflict involves the confronta-
tion of the grandmother and The Misfit. Here we see the religious
element.

The grandmother is selfish and shallow. She tries to manipulate
the family into going to Tennessee to see her relatives--"you all ought
to take [the children] somewhere else for a change so they would see
different parts of the world and be broad. They never have been to
East Tennessee" (*GM.* 9). She speaks in cliches--"In my time . . .
children were more respectful of their native states and their parents
and everything else" (*GM.* 12). And she clings to a stereotypical belief
in racial superiority--"Oh look at that cute little pickaninny . . . .
Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do" (*GM.* 12).
Our initial impression of the grandmother is, then, one of narrowness,
all too common, even though she is relatively harmless.

It is only when she confronts The Misfit that the grandmother's true
character is revealed. The Misfit introduces himself very graphically
after he is recognized as a murderer:

> I never was a bad boy that I remember of . . . but
> somewheres along the line I done something wrong and got
> sent to the penitentiary. I was buried alive . . . . Turn
> to the right, it was a wall . . . . Turn to the left, it
> was a wall. Look up it was a ceiling, look down it was a
> floor . . . . I found out the crime don't matter. You can
> do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a
> tire off his car, because sooner or later you're going to
> forget what it was you done and just be punished for it.
> (*GM.* 25-26)

These words, along with his graying hair and "silver-rimmed spectacles

that gave him a scholarly look" (*GM.* 21), endow The Misfit with an air

of tragic intensity, and in confronting him the grandmother quickly

finds herself out of her depth. As her family are being killed one by

one, all she can repeat are the meaningless cliches by which she has

lived: "You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?" (*GM.* 22); "I know you're

a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood" (*GM.* 22).

In the face of her own death, she falls back upon her religion as she

tells The Misfit, "If you pray . . . Jesus would help you" (*GM.* 26). But

like everything else in her life, her religion is shallow, especially

when compared to the strong religious feelings which have arisen out of

The Misfit's sufferings. Rejecting the old lady's suggestion that he

pray--"I'm doing all right by myself" (*GM.* 26)--The Misfit, in an

incredible passage, explains his life of crime:

> Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead . . . .
> And He shouldn't have done it. He thown everything off
> balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you
> to do but thow away everything and follow Him, and if He
> didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few
> minutes you got left the best way you can--by killing somebody
> or burning down his barn or doing some other meanness to
> him. No pleasure but meanness . . . . (*GM.* 28)

The shock at the deaths of the other members of her family and the

forcefulness of this statement and of the pain it reveals in the man with

his "face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry" (*GM*. 29) cause the grandmother, for perhaps the first time in her life, to have genuinely deep feelings, to consider someone's pain other than her own, and to recognize her kinship with all of humanity, "common" though it might be. "Why you're one of my babies," she says as she reaches out in true affection, "You're one of my own children" (*GM*. 29). For an instant she transcends the sub-human selfishness and shallowness that have thus far characterized her existence. She is saved, and the vehicle of her salvation is, like Christ, a societal outcast, one who has said of Christ, "It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn't committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one because they had papers on me" (*GM*. 27).

The grandmother's salvation is not, however, to be savored in this life, for as she reaches out, The Misfit springs back "as if a snake had bitten him" (*GM*. 29) and shoots her three times through the chest. This is the price of salvation in Flannery O'Connor's world. Christ is the saviour, but He visits in strange forms. He "comes not lamb-like and meek, as a rule, but comes in terrifying glory, riding the whirlwind."[41] It is in such glory that The Misfit sums up the grandmother's existence and, by implication, our own: "she would of been a good woman . . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life . . . . It's no real pleasure in life" (*GM*. 29).

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[41]Robert Drake, "'The Bleeding Stinking Mad Shadow of Jesus' in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 3 (1966), p. 184.

Running counter to this horrifying view of life, however, is a strain of genuine comedy seen in the characters, irony, and imagery. The grandmother's clever stratagems and the children's gullability in believing her fabrications are amusing, as are the descriptions of the characters. The mother has a face "as broad and innocent as a cabbage" (GM. 9); Bailey looks absurd in his "yellow sport shirt with bright blue parrots designed in it" (GM. 20); and the grandmother dons "a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim" so that "In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (GM. 11). There is even a hint of comedy in the murder scenes. When asked if she wants to join her husband, who has obviously just been killed, the children's mother says, "Yes, thank you" (GM. 27), and in the final scene we see the disheveled grandmother, the "lady," in a darkly comic pose as she "half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky" (GM. 29).

The story is definitely grotesque; the unresolved tension between the comic and tragic elements continues up to and beyond the end. But the grotesque effect is not simple. The Misfit is obviously mentally deformed, and it is true, as Robert Drake says, that in O'Connor's view "physical or mental deformity of the outward and visible sort always suggests inner, spiritual deformity."[42] The Misfit has rejected Christ and lives his life as a murderer. But the grotesque effect centers just as much in the distortion in the grandmother's character, and,

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[42]Drake, *Flannery O'Connor*, p. 39.

appropriately, she is the one who is the object of the biting satire.

O'Connor does not invest the obviously evil Misfit with really admirable

characteristics--she is too moral for that--but she uses his aberration

as a means of showing how common true evil can be. The Misfit's

distortion does indicate evil, but his evil shines beside the pallor of

the grandmother's goodness. He has examined life as thoroughly as his

limited mind will allow, he has suffered, and he has made a decision.

The grandmother has lived in a self-centered dream world. By juxtapos-

ing these distorted characters, O'Connor implies that commitment, albeit

negative, is in many ways superior to complacency. She explains this

point in an essay written to defend the harshness of her fiction:

> The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life
> distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will
> be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which
> is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced
> to take ever more violent means to get his point across to
> this hostile audience.[43]

O'Connor realizes and takes advantage of our preconceptions about good

and evil and their existential embodiments. We know that murderers are

evil, yet The Misfit, because of his intense pain, gains our admiration

in a way in which the grandmother never can. By personifying the

relatively admirable in a hideously abnormal character like The Misfit,

O'Connor exposes the darkness which underlies our familiar world and

forces us to re-examine that world. "To the hard of hearing you shout,"

she once wrote, "and for the almost blind you draw large and startling

figures." O'Connor takes advantage of the powerful attention-getting

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[43]O'Connor, "Fiction Writer," p. 162.   [44]Ibid.

quality of the grotesque, while effecting a subtle variation of the tradition as we have established it. She does not go so far as to invest the obviously abnormal character with characteristics worthy of emulation--thus totally inverting the tradition--but she begins the process by removing the stigma of divergence from the norm.

This explication of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" establishes the pattern which we may trace through much of O'Connor's other fiction. As a Catholic, she believed that we live in a fallen world, as is revealed in her characters. In many of her stories, she defines a state of grace wholly in negative terms. She juxtaposes characters who reveal, in their words and actions, fallen worlds of ignorance, narrowness, bigotry, and pure evil. In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Tom T. Shiftlet, a demonic, one-armed anti-Christ, is opposed to a scheming Mrs. Crater and her idiot daughter Lucynell. In "The Lame Shall Enter First," Rufus Johnson, club-footed servant of the devil, is pitted against Sheppard, a laughably naive social worker and do-gooder whose neglect causes his own son to commit suicide. "Good Country People" features Hulga (Joy) Hopewell, a bitter, cynical, despicable, one-legged girl who justly loses her prosthesis to an ingenious but thoroughly evil Bible salesman. And "Everything That Rises Must Converge" shows racial bigotry in Julian's mother and intellectual bigotry in Julian. On those occasions when O'Connor seems actually to point the way to salvation, she shows very vividly that the road is not an easy one. Just as the grandmother of "A Good Man" is saved only to be killed, Harry Ashfield, a young child in "The River," finds grace as he drowns in baptismal waters, and Parker, of "Parker's Back," achieves salvation only to lose his wife and home. The

world of Flannery O'Connor is a harsh one, but over it is spread a veil
of humor, whether it be the irony of a disgusting person like Hulga
being beaten at her own game, or the black slapstick comedy of the idiot
Lucynell Crater, whose major action is falling off her chair. The
effect is pure grotesquerie.

As with all good writers, O'Connor did not write purely doctrinaire
fiction. She created living characters in believable situations, not
with the simple motive of moralizing, but to show, in bold terms, life
as she conceived it. As she explained in a letter to James Farnham:

> Essentially the reason why my characters are grotesque is
> because it is the nature of my talent to make them so.
> To some extent the writer can choose his subject; but he
> can never choose what he is able to make live.[45]

This attitude explains her willingness to treat her evil characters with
comic ambivalence; O'Connor was trying to convey a vision of the world,
not merely to impose a moral upon it. The grandmother she created is in
many ways despicable, but she is also sometimes lovable, sometimes
amusing, and O'Connor could not ignore this complexity. Like Faulkner
and the medieval moralists, she did not see life purely in "black and
white"; rather, she peered deeply into the gray areas of existence--the
areas of the unnatural in which murderers can arouse sympathy and
grandmothers, disgust--without fear of losing her way and finding only
moral chaos at the end. The roads taken by O'Connor and her medieval
counterparts traversed differing philosophical terrain, but both ended in

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[45] For extended treatment of the grotesque in O'Connor's fiction,
see Gilbert H. Muller, *Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and
the Catholic Grotesque* (Athens, Ga.: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1972).
Reference here is to p. 21.

a faith of considerable depth and intensity which can come only from looking at evil in the world with eyes wide open. She summed this perception succinctly: "The Christian writer will feel that in the greatest depth of vision, moral judgment will be implicit."[46] She allows us to emulate neither the grandmother nor The Misfit, both grotesques, but rather she forces us to search for "the ultimate concept of straightness or 'oughtness,' without which the grotesque is meaningless."[47] For O'Connor, this opposite to grotesquerie lies in Christian orthodoxy.

There is much that is new and shocking in Flannery O'Connor's fiction, but in her use of the grotesque, she is traditional. The grotesque for her is basically a means of defining by negation, as it was for medieval artists, but O'Connor has subtly enriched the effect by showing how many shapes the grotesque can take, even some of those we are accustomed to seeing as normal. The intensity of the effect depends, however, upon the same sort of conceptions of good and evil that we discerned in the Middle Ages. By playing against this tradition, O'Connor creates something both new and very much a part of the past.

If Flannery O'Connor begins the inversion of the grotesque tradition by making characters such as The Misfit relatively more admirable than her normal characters, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., develops the technique further by investing his grotesques with humane qualities worthy of emulation. Vonnegut uses grotesquerie to comment on man's environment and his ability to adapt to it. He creates characters who

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[46]O'Connor, "Fiction Writer," p. 160.

[47]Drake, *Flannery O'Connor*, p. 23.

fit the grotesque pattern as we have established it; that is, they are limited in their ability to adapt to society and are thus thought insane by that society. In an ordered, rational society, these limitations would be considered detrimental to human development, but in our world as Vonnegut views it, they become the only available means of reaching full humanity. Whether speaking of the inhumanity of war or of man's increasing subordination to machines, Vonnegut stresses, above all, the need for understanding the feelings of others in a world which has little regard for the value of the individual. With keen insight and superb, deceptively straightforward technical ability, he presents our world-- "this damaged planet,"[48] as he calls it--from a new perspective and forces us to see it in a new way. When, in the preface to *Breakfast of Champions*, he says, "I now make my living by being impolite" (*BC*. 2), Vonnegut gives us the key to his work. Politeness--like patriotism and prosperity and progress and so many other meaningless modern clichés-- is part of a conventional, even comfortable view of the world; but such a view of our world, which is characterized by inhumanity, is not only false but also inhibits individual growth. Vonnegut wants to destroy this view. "Let others bring order to chaos," he writes, "I would bring chaos to order" (*BC*. 210). He wants to penetrate the shallow surface of the conventional world and expose the irrationality and insensitivity which it masks. He accomplishes this task with a surprisingly quick wit and a tone that is basically comic, but underlying the comedy at every turn is

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[48]Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Breakfast of Champions, or Goodbye Blue Monday* (New York: Dell, 1973), p. 5. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *BC* and page number.

a dark, arresting seriousness with which we must come to terms.

We can begin to understand his basic method by looking at his descriptions of the commonplace. Of Kentucky Fried Chicken, for instance, he says:

> The idea was to kill [the chicken] and pull out all its feathers, and cut off its head and feet and scoop out its internal organs--and then chop it into pieces and fry the pieces, and put the pieces into a waxed paper bucket with a lid on it. (*BC*. 158)

He describes alcohol as "a substance produced by a tiny creature called yeast. Yeast organisms ate sugar and excreted alcohol. They killed themselves by destroying their own environment with yeast shit" (*BC*. 208). And he compares the erect penis to "a plugged-up garden hose" (*BC*. 147). These descriptions are intended to surprise and amuse us, but also to force us to acknowledge the more unsavory aspects of our existence. He does not destroy or even diminish the pleasures we derive from chicken or alcohol or erections--his descriptions are much too funny for that--but he does heighten awareness by his undeniable assertions. What Vonnegut does with these details, he does with the world as a whole, peopling the landscape with a series of grotesque, overly sensitive, insane persons who show in their responses various ways of dealing with a world gone wrong. By looking at the worlds and characters he creates in three novels, *Breakfast of Champions*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, we can discover the progression in the use of the grotesque by "our funniest pessimist,"[49] as one reviewer calls him.

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[49] Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*, cover.

Breakfast of Champions is a riotously funny novel. The main character, besides Vonnegut's perennial science fiction writer Kilgore Trout, is Dwayne Hoover, a "fabulously well-to-do" (*BC*. 13) Pontiac dealer from Midland City. Although Hoover is a great success in the business world, he is insane, and his insanity is at once a source of amusement and of alarm. Hoover's insanity is caused by a combination of "bad chemicals" and "bad ideas." The bad chemicals cause him to let reality slip from his grasp. As he walked in the parking lot of his Holiday Inn, for instance,

> he discovered that someone had turned the asphalt into a
> sort of trampoline. It sank beneath Dwayne's weight. It
> dropped Dwayne to well below street level, then slowly
> brought him part way up again. He was in a shallow, rubbery
> dimple . . . [and] progressed from dimple to dimple. (*BC*. 95)

As his physical world gives way, so does his mental world. He speaks softly in conversation, "in case he was conversing with an hallucination" (*BC*. 98). He makes and immediately forgets elaborate plans for Hawaiian Week at his Pontiac showroom and simultaneously destroys the ego of his transvestite sales manager by failing to notice a change of clothes. He comes down with "incipient echolalia" and finds himself "wanting to repeat out loud whatever has just been said" (*BC*. 131). In this weakened condition, Dwayne is ready for the "bad ideas." These are inadvertently supplied by Kilgore Trout in one of his science fiction books, *Now It Can Be Told*:

> Here was the core of the bad ideas which Trout gave to
> Dwayne: Everybody on Earth was a robot, with one exception--
> Dwayne Hoover.
> Of all the creatures in the Universe, only Dwayne was
> thinking and feeling and worrying and planning and so on.
> Nobody else knew what pain was. Nobody else had any choices

to make. Everybody else was a fully automatic machine,
whose only purpose was to stimulate Dwayne. Dwayne was
a new type of creature being tested by the creator of the
universe. (*BC.* 14-15)

Although Trout intended *Now It Can Be Told* to be merely a *tour de force*, Dwayne receives it as "the message" and screams in a frenzy of relief, "Why should I care what happens to machines?" (*BC.* 263). With the discovery of the mechanical nature of others, Dwayne feels relieved of normal human responsibility for them, and he goes on a rampage. He bites off Kilgore Trout's finger, badly injures his homosexual son Bunny--"a God damn cock-sucking machine!" (*BC.* 258)--and breaks three ribs and the jaw of his mistress--"best fucking machine in the state" (*BC.* 272).

These absurd incidents and the humorous asides by the author--who, for example, gives penis length or breast size for each of his characters--create the effect of pornographic slapstick. But the humor darkens as we examine the deeper causes of Dwayne's disease. He lives in the barren but familiar modern world of interstate highways, Holiday Inns, and Pontiac showrooms, cheap tourist attractions, and polluted creeks. But to Vonnegut this landscape mirrors in its bleakness the spiritual numbness of mechanized society:

It didn't matter much what Dwayne said. It hadn't mattered
much for years. It didn't matter much what most people in
Midland City said out loud, except when they were speaking
about money or structures or travel or machinery or other
measurable things. Every person had a clearly defined part
to play--as a black person, a female high-school drop-out,
a Pontiac dealer, a gynecologist, a gas-conversion burner
installer . . . . Their imaginations were flywheels on the
ramshackle machinery of the awful truth. (*BC.* 142)

Others besides Dwayne Hoover react to this spiritual wasteland in abnormal ways. His first wife Celia commits suicide by eating Drāno; his

son becomes a "notorious homosexual" (*BC.* 65); his sales manager, a closet transvestite; and his secretary, "a machine made out of meat--a typing machine, a filing machine" (*BC.* 188). Dwayne sums up the universal situation when he says, "I've lost my way. I need someone to take me by the hand and lead me out of the woods" (*BC.* 167). But he is so desperate for the guiding hand that he clings to the first truth he finds--that in *Now It Can Be Told*--and begins his downfall. As humorous as Dwayne's situation has been, the result of his honest questioning is tragic, for because of his rampage, he loses everything and becomes but "one more withered balloon of an old man on Midland City's Skid Row" (*BC.* 280).

Dwayne Hoover is grotesque because he reaches a resolution that is in human terms unworkable. His function is in one sense traditional in that he is used to define successful living by negation. But he is also used, like O'Connor's Misfit, to show the chaotic nature of the world. As Kilgore Trout writes, "It is exhausting, having to reason all the time in a universe which wasn't meant to be reasonable" (*BC.* 253). Dwayne is a sensitive individual; he feels that God has placed him in the world "to find out how much a man can take without breaking" (*BC.* 166). "We must adapt ourselves to the requirements of chaos," Vonnegut writes. Dwayne tries to adapt, but he becomes exhausted and breaks too easily. He accepts an answer which, while temporarily easing his own mental burden, denies the ultimate humanity of those around him and makes them little more than machines. Any legitimate adaptation must, Vonnegut implies, include a comprehensive and compassionate view of the value of man or it becomes grotesque, as ludicrous as it is destructive. This view is summed up in Kilgore Trout's epitaph: "We are healthy only to

the extent that our ideas are humane" (*BC*. 16).

The chaotic world and a sensitive man's struggle to adapt to it are also the central concerns of Vonnegut's most famous novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The book was inspired by Vonnegut's experiences as a prisoner of war in World War II, during which he witnessed the fire-bombing of Dresden, where 135,000 people were killed. Billy Pilgrim, the book's main character, is present at Dresden, and the bombing leaves a permanent scar on his memory, as does the entire war experience:

> I am from a planet [he explains to alien Tralfamadorians]
> that has engaged in senseless slaughter since the beginning
> of time. I myself have seen the bodies of schoolgirls who
> were boiled alive in a water tower by my countrymen, who
> were proud of fighting pure evil at the time . . . . And I
> have lit my way in a prison at night with candles from the
> fat of human beings who were butchered by the brothers and
> fathers of these schoolgirls who were boiled.[50]

The result of Billy's contemplating such barbarity is insanity; he comes "unstuck in time" (*SHF*. 23). Caught in a "time-warp" (*SHF*. 26), Billy "never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next" (*SHF*. 23). In his mind, he lives alternately as a prisoner of war, an optometry student, or a happily married, very successful business-man. In addition, he continually relives his wife's violent death in an automobile accident and his own near death in a plane crash. He is transported to the planet of Tralfamadore to be displayed in a geodesic dome with the pornographic movie queen, Montana Wildhack, and then back to earth, where he can contemplate his literal death at the hands of a

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[50]Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade* (1969; rpt. New York: Dell, 1973), p. 116. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *SHF* and page number.

bitter fellow prisoner of war who holds a life-long grudge. Such constant time-traveling is disorienting to both Billy and the reader. Being unable to live consistently in the present, whatever that might be, Billy is constantly abstracted from his routine existence and at such times is perceived to be insane by those around him. Humor arises from Billy's inability to adjust to his constantly shifting world and from the other characters' inability to adjust to him.

But this temporal confusion also serves an important thematic function. Vonnegut shows us Billy's life at several stages, ranging from youth to old age, but juxtaposed against each of these stages is the horror which Billy experienced at Dresden. If he is insane, his insanity is shown to be a result of his inability to escape the past. This inability makes him both grotesque and sympathetic. Once Billy realizes, as he does at a very early age, the extent of man's inhumanity to his fellow creatures, he is unable fully to value such time-honored concepts as success and good reputation, with which his family is obsessed, for these concepts, without a base of solid compassion, are meaningless. Thus Billy becomes pessimistic about human freedom. When confronted by an apologist for the Dresden bombing, Billy replies, "It was all right. Everything is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does" (*SHF*. 198). When he is taught by the Tralfamadorians to "spend eternity looking at pleasant moments" (*SHF*. 117), Billy gives up his earthly existence, and we last see him lounging in the contentment of the Tralfamadorian geodesic dome with his lovely wife and his newly born baby. Although Vonnegut implies that Billy has finally gained "the serenity to accept the things [he] cannot change" (*SHF*. 209), the

resolution is a false one, for Billy has left the earth--on which we all must live--446,120,000,000,000,000 miles behind. Grotesque in his insanity, Billy Pilgrim, like Dwayne Hoover, accepts a simplistic answer to a difficult question, for he abrogates his responsibility to other human beings. He is not, however, to be condemned, for his is an honest reaction to a world of insensitivity, brutality, and utter absurdity.

Vonnegut's use of the grotesque is thus ambivalent. In some ways he is like the medieval moralists and Faulkner in that he shows the distortions of characters who narrow their existence and thus cut themselves off from the richness of life. But in other, very important ways, Vonnegut alters the tradition and, like Flannery O'Connor, creates a fallen world in which the grotesque becomes, in a sense, more desirable than the normal. Dwayne Hoover and Billy Pilgrim are insane, but this insanity results from their heightened sensitivity in a sadly desensitized world. Normality begins to become synonomous with insensitivity.

This idea is made explicit in what is in many ways Vonnegut's central novel, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Eliot Rosewater, the main character is a societal aberration--"a drunkard, a Utopian dreamer, a tinhorn saint, an aimless fool."[51] He is the last heir to a fabulous fortune, but instead of living in the style of a rich man, Rosewater moves to a factory town, opens a foundation to help the needy, and begins to give away all his money. "I'm going to *care* about these people," he says, "I'm going to love these discarded Americans, even though they're

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[51] Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls Before Swine* (New York: Dell, 1973), p. 14. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *MR* and page number.

useless and unattractive. That is going to be my work of art" (MR. 35-
36). Rosewater, grossly overweight and questionably hygienic, is
grotesque in his defiance of accepted standards, but the standards
themselves are the real objects of ridicule, for he practices his com-
passion in a heartless society in which "the American dream turned belly
up, turned green, bobbed to the surface of cupidity unlimited, filled
with gas, went *bang* in the noonday sun" (MR. 13). Eliot is, indeed, "a
flamboyantly sick man" (MR. 23) in society's terms, but he is free of
"samaritrophia"--"the suppression of an overactive conscience by the rest
of the mind" (MR. 42)--a disease which is "virtually as common among
healthy Americans as noses" (MR. 43). To be healthy is not necessarily to
be normal, for Vonnegut assures us that "a normal person, functioning well
on the upper levels of a prosperous, industrialized society, can hardly
hear his conscience at all" (MR. 43). Without conscience there can be
no compassion, and since, as Eliot learns, "people can use all the
uncritical love they can get" (MR. 186), the grotesque--that is, the
violation of the norm--becomes the means of retaining humanity.[52]

Rabo Karabekian, a much misunderstood artist in *Breakfast of
Champions*, says that the purpose of his art is to stimulate awareness,
for "our awareness is all that is alive and maybe sacred in any of us.
Everything else about us is dead machinery" (BC. 219). This sums up
Vonnegut's art as well, and he uses the grotesque as a means of stimulat-
ing this awareness. As he explains:

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[52]Vonnegut uses the grotesque in similar ways in his characteriza-
tion of Howard W. Campbell in *Mother Night* and Doctor Paul Proteus in
Player Piano.

> The things other people have put into my head . . . do not
> fit together nicely, are often useless and ugly, are out of
> proportion with one another, are out of proportion with life
> as it really is outside my head. (*BC.* 5)

To rid himself and his readers of such useless preconceptions, Vonnegut
effects a complete reversal of our expectations by negating the normal
world and investing the negation with positive value. The effect is as
powerful as it is entertaining, as we laugh our way onto a whole new
level of awareness.

In Peter Shaffer's recent play, *Equus*, the grotesque could be said
to have a dual function. In some ways it functions as it did in
Vonnegut's works--that is, it is used to make a devastating comment on
normality. But in a very real sense, the grotesque pushes the play
beyond this level and forces us to realize the limits of our knowledge
of ourselves. The play concerns the struggle of the two main characters
to understand themselves and each other. Alan Strang, the obvious
grotesque, is a deranged seventeen-year-old who blinds six horses with
a metal spike for no apparent reason. After the crime, Alan cuts himself
off from contact with other people. He answers serious questions with
television jingles and violently resists parental and professional assist-
ance, yet he desperately desires relief from his excruciating mental
malady. Martin Dysart is a conventional, yet extremely sensitive middle-
aged psychiatrist who is called in to determine the reasons for the boy's
brutality and to effect a "cure." Though highly intelligent and
successful in his profession, Dysart is unhappy. He leads an unfulfill-
ing life because he lacks genuine depth of feeling. He and Alan clash,
and the value of normality is brought violently into question, as is man's

ability to grasp the complexity of his existence.

Alan is obviously disturbed, as we can see from his blinding the horses. Dysart gives a chilling description:

> Think about [Alan]. He can hardly read. He knows no
> physics or engineering to make the world real for him. No
> paintings to show him how others have enjoyed it. No music
> except television jingles. No history except tales from a
> desperate mother. No friends. Not one kid to give him a
> joke, or make him know himself more moderately. He's a
> modern citizen for whom society does not exist.[53]

With great technical skill, Dysart uncovers Alan's past and provides us at least a partial explanation for the boy's behavior. Alan's original religious feelings are quite strong and become a source of conflict between his overly devout mother and his atheistic father. Conventional religion is thus denied him, and Alan redirects his intense religious interests toward a new god, horses. In an elaborate fantasy world of religious ritual, Alan consummates his love for the god in a midnight ride once every three weeks. He takes a horse to the "Field of Ha Ha," full of mist and nettles, and there he rides naked in an orgiastic celebration of victory over the world which seeks unsuccessfully to confine him. The horse is at once a symbol of rebellion from parental authority--his father had once been rebuked by a horseman on the beach--and from the electrical shop in which Alan works--Equus rides against his sworn enemies, "The Hosts of Hoover, The Hosts of Philco, The Hosts of Pifco, The House of Remington and all its tribe" (*E.* 72).

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[53] Peter Shaffer, *Equus, A Play* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1973),
p. 56. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *E* and page number.

As is evident from these examples, there is an element of play in Alan's otherwise serious association with the horses. He delights in recounting the episode on the beach and gets a curious sense of freedom from riding against his enemies. This attitude provides much of the humor and lightness of what is in many ways a humorous drama.

Alan finds, however, that these gods are not docile; like old nags, rather, they can become obsessions--"*dreadful creatures out of nightmare . . . archetypal images--judging, punishing, pitiless*" (*E*. 103)--as they do when Alan tries to have sex with an attractive girl his own age. Unable to complete the act, Alan can think only of Equus. He explains:

> When I touched her, I felt *Him*. Under me . . . His side,
> waiting for my hand . . . . I looked right at her . . . .
> And I couldn't do it. When I shut my eyes, I saw Him at
> once . . . I couldn't feel her flesh at all! I wanted the
> foam off his neck . . . . Then I couldn't even kiss her.
> (*E*. 100)

In desperation, Alan jabs out the eyes of his god, who had witnessed his attempted sexual betrayal. The eyes have dominated Alan's dreams since childhood, and now he is saddened by the loss of his god and haunted by his own sense of guilt. He is truly in pain; he is plagued by nightmares from which he awakes screaming "Ek . . . Ek" (*E*. 26); and he reaches out to Dysart for help.

But Alan's pain is, as Dysart realizes so acutely, in some ways desirable. It is "His pain. His own. He made it" (*E*. 80), and the very intensity with which he feels it exercises a powerful attraction on the virtually passionless psychiatrist. Dysart lives a routine nine-to-five existence, has an incompatible, equally dispassionate wife, and escapes for only "three weeks a year in the Peleponnese, every bed booked in

advance, every meal paid for by vouchers, cautious jaunts in hired Fiats, suitcase crammed with Kao-Pectate" (*E.* 81). He has no "Field of Ha Ha"; he sits at home with books on classical art and lives only vicariously. With characteristic wit--and his wit is another source of the play's considerable humor--Dysart amuses and chills us with "dry agony" (*E.* 8) as he speaks the ironic truth of his existence:

> While I sit there, baiting a poor unimaginative woman with
> the word, that freaky boy tries to conjure the reality! I
> sit looking at centaurs trampling the soil of Argos--and
> outside my window he is trying to *become one* in a Hampshire
> field! . . . I watch that woman knitting, night after night--
> a woman I haven't *kissed* in six years, and he stands in the
> dark for an hour, sucking the sweat off his God's hairy
> cheek! Then in the morning, I put away my books on the
> cultural shelf, close up the kodachrome snaps of Mount
> Olympus, touch my reproduction statue of Dionysus for luck--
> and go off to hospital to treat him for insanity. (*E.* 81)

Dysart is, in society's terms, normal; Alan is grotesque. But Alan is living intensely, while Dysart is spiritually dead. Alan will be cured, for "passion . . . can be destroyed by a doctor" (*E.* 106), but in this cure lies the tragedy of the play. Alan's existence, despite its extreme violation of normal human expectations, is relatively attractive when seen against the colorless backdrop of normal life, and the play is, on one level, a profound meditation upon the problem of "normality," of successful adjustment to the world as it presently exists. Like Vonnegut, and to some extent O'Connor, Shaffer has inverted the grotesque tradition. The grotesque in its negative sense is not, for Shaffer, one who deviates from the norm, but rather, one who, like a mirror, reflects the spiritual numbness of life in an increasingly complex world. As Dysart observes, "The Normal is the good smile in a child's eyes--all right. It is also

the dead stare in a million adults . . . the indispensable, murderous
God of Health" (*E*. 63).

We can understand this point and go beyond it by looking at the
various levels of the play's two major symbols, the horses' heads and the
chain-bits which rein them. The horses are actually present on the stage
in the form of actors:

> On their heads are tough masks made of alternating bands
> of silver wire and leather: Their eyes are outlined by
> leather blinkers. The actors' own heads are seen beneath
> them: no attempt should be made to conceal them. (*E*. 13)

That the human head is seen beneath the horse's head is significant, for
the horse has affinities with the human characters. Dysart explains:

> I'm wearing that horse's head myself. That's the feeling.
> All reined up in old language and old assumptions, straining
> to jump clean-hoofed on to a whole new track of being I only
> suspect is there . . . I can't jump because the bit forbids
> it. (*E*. 18)

Thus, the horse's head and the bit stand, on one level, for the limitations
which are placed on an individual by society, for the "normal," in other
words. Dysart wears the head already, and his job is to put Alan under
the same restrictions, to "saddle" him with acceptable behavior by
destroying the passion which makes him unfit for life in society.

If we trace the development of the symbolism, however, we will see
that *Equus* is more than just a comment on abnormality; it is a statement
of the complexity of the human situation in a much broader sense, and
Alan, the grotesque, is the vehicle by which Shaffer makes this statement.
Alan's mother is correct, as Dysart painfully realizes, when she rebukes
the psychiatrist for implying that the parents are at fault. She asserts:

> Whatever's happened has happened *because of Alan*. Alan is
> himself. Every soul is itself. If you added up everything we

ever did to him, from his first day on earth to this, you
wouldn't find out why he did this terrible thing--because
that's him: not just all our things added up. (*E.* 77)

This is the real point of the play, as is shown in Dysart's desperate

questioning:

A child is born into a world of phenomena all equal in
their power to enslave. It sniffs--it sucks--it strokes
its eyes over the whole uncomfortable range. Suddenly
one strikes. Why? Moments snap together like magnets,
forging a chain of shackles. Why? . . . I don't know.
And nor can anyone else. (*E.* 75)

These ideas cluster around the horse's head and the symbolic chain bit,

or "chinkle-chankle" (*E.* 68), as Alan calls it. When Dysart says at the

end of the play, "There is now, in my mouth, this sharp chain. And it

never comes out" (*E.* 106), the chain has come to stand for the burden of

consciousness, the weight of the knowledge of the ultimately inexplicable

nature of life. Nothing is resolved in the play. Alan is sick, but the

cure is in many ways worse than the disease. Dysart, whose dull but

until now endurable life has been badly shaken, is also sick. He is

jolted into consciousness and left with an unanswerable question that will

haunt him forever. And we in the audience remain with him in the

existential blackness of the final curtain burdened with the same

question: "What way is this? . . . *What dark is this*?" (*E.* 106).

Shaffer has violently shaken our world before us by creating a

shockingly abnormal character but not allowing us to form a stable attitude

toward him. We are simultaneously amused at Alan's naiveté, repulsed by

his actions, and deeply touched by his pain and sensitivity. Shaffer

undermines our concepts of normality and abnormality, but unlike the

other writers we have considered, he gives us nothing with which to replace

them. The medieval moralists, Faulkner, O'Connor, and Vonnegut, all present, or at least imply, alternatives to their grotesquerie. They counter, albeit indirectly, vice with virtue, narrowness with breadth, disbelief with faith, or insensitivity with compassion. Shaffer does not do this--he poses questions but offers no answers, and we are left face to face with a life stripped of solutions to problems. This play represents a significant advance in the use of the grotesque. Whereas before grotesquerie has been used to teach us something, here it is used to reveal to us our inability to learn "ultimate things." We stand humbled before an inexplicable world and watch as our comfortable associations crumble one by one. The source of the play's disturbing power is the mysterious insanity of Alan, the grotesque, the tool with which Shaffer dismantles our outer world and leaves us searching for "a way of seeing in the dark" (*E.* 106). Such an effect could hardly be gained by conventional means, for as Dysart observes, "The *extremity* is the point" (*E.* 18).

Extremity of a similar kind is found in the works of Samuel Beckett.[54] Beckett's characters might well ask, with Dysart, "What dark is this?", for they exist in a perpetual spatial and temporal darkness

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[54]In my treatment of Beckett as an English writer, I agree with David Daiches: "In a cosmopolitan age, when a major American novelist is named Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, when a major English poet (T. S. Eliot) hailed from St. Louis, Missouri, and when a major British poet (W. H. Auden), who was an American citizen, spent most of his time in Austria, Beckett has every right to be considered an Irishman in exile, and to take his place in the English literary tradition." M. H. Abrams et al., eds., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 3rd ed., Vol. 2 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), p. 2234.

lighted only occasionally by a flash of insight from deep within the individual consciousness, and even this insight is fleeting. By looking briefly at four of his novels--*Watt*, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*--we can begin to see how Beckett, one of the most challenging writers of the century, pushes the grotesque to new limits in an attempt to explore in fiction the human situation in the modern world.

The novels are unusual in several respects. As J. C. Oates points out, "The usual furniture of the novel is forsaken here--plot, character, continuity, setting, even conceptions of time and space."[55] The plot of *Watt* is very simple: A man named Watt goes to work for a mysterious Mr. Knott, stays for an undetermined period of time, and leaves. *Molloy* tells two stories. In one, an invalid named Molloy recounts a fateful bicycle journey in search of his mother; in the other, a social worker named Moran tells of searching for the destitute Molloy. Whether either succeeds in his search, we are never really sure, nor are they. In *Malone Dies*, the main character is confined to a bed, in an unknown room, and has at his disposal little more than a pencil and a stick, both of which he loses during the course of the novel. He fills up the time remaining before his death by creating disconnected fictions. And the main character of *The Unnamable* does little more than think; the novel is virtually motionless except for the movement of his mind.

These characters are obviously grotesque in their physical irregularities, their humor, and their absurd situations. Watt is

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[55] J. C. Oates, "The Trilogy of Samuel Beckett," *Renascence*, 14 (Spring, 1962), 160.

humpbacked; Molloy and Moran are immobilized by stiffened legs. Malone's body is "what is called, unadvisedly perhaps, impotent, there is virtually nothing it can do."[56] The Unnamable has lost all appendages-- "All those things have fallen, all the things that stick out,"[57] he says--and lives for a time in a bottle. Though physically pathetic, these characters are humorous in their observations. Whether we hear Molloy speaking of his first sexual experience--"I would have made love to a goat, to know what love was"--[58]or Malone making an inverse analogy between his impending death and the birth process--"The feet are clear already, of the great cunt of existence" (*MD*. 391)--or the Unnamed One speculating on the nature of his existence--"Perhaps I'm a dying sperm, in the sheets of an innocent boy" (*U*. 527)--we are from first to last surprised and amused by the originality and irreverence of these thoughts. But the humor darkens as we realize that it originates in a scene of "metaphysical chaos";[59] the characters do not understand their existence. None knows where he is, how long he has been there, nor why he is there. "All this is not very clear" (*M*. 143), Moran says. And each is involved

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[56]Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*, in *Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable: Three Novels by Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 253. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *MD* and page number.

[57]Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in *Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable: Three Novels by Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 421. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *U* and page number.

[58]Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, in *Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable: Three Novels by Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 73. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *M* and page number.

[59]Oates, p. 164.

in a profound questioning, as is typified in the Unnamed One's desperate
cry, "If only I knew if I lived, if I live, if I'll live, that would
simplify everything" (*U.* 574).

Beckett's fictional world is obviously unusual, but, as several
critics have tried to show, it is not strangeness for its own sake. Hugh
Kenner and Ruby Cohn, for instance, believe that the novels are a fictional
embodiment of the philosophy of Descartes, who "makes the whole of
intelligible reality depend on the mental processes of a solitary man."[60]
Descartes says in Book IV of *The Discourse on Method*, "I could suppose
that I had no body, and that there was no world nor any place in which I
might be,"[61] and the parallels with the virtually bodiless consciousnesses
of Beckett's characters, particularly The Unnamable, are easily estab-
lished. In contrast, Joyce Carol Oates sees the basis of Beckett's
thought in the radical skepticism of David Hume, who finds no certain
continuity in natural law.[62] It is impossible, according to Hume, to form
from past experience a meaningful explanation of life, for we can know no
true cause-and-effect relationships. Just because a particular "cause"
has always preceded a particular "effect," we cannot be sure that it
always will do so in the future. "From the unexceptionable order which
has prevailed here up to date may I infer that such will always be the

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[60]Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (New York:
Grove Press, 1961), p. 17.

[61]Quoted in Ruby Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* (New
Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1962), p. 117.

[62]Oates, p. 161.

case?" The Unnamable asks: "I may of course . . . [but] this excellent explanation does not satisfy me" (*U*. 407). Cut off from the security of the past and the hope of a predictable future, these characters flounder in a present rife with uncertainty. As perceptive as Kenner and Cohn and Oates may be, however, we cannot be completely satisfied with their explanations, for Beckett's mind is too fertile for such easy classification. He is not bound to any one philosopher. Indeed, as Milton J. Friedman points out, "The philosophers [associated with Beckett] are so numerous that we can merely say that they extend from the pre-Socratics through the Logical Positivists, and include Descartes and Leibniz."[63]

We can understand Beckett's works better if we view them not as the embodiment of a particular philosophy, but as the culmination of what might be called the "modern tradition." We saw at the beginning of this chapter how modern thought breaks with that of the past. The world is no longer necessarily centered around an all-powerful God; our concept of rationality has been altered by recent discoveries of the disconnected nature of our thought processes and of the irrational forces at work within our minds; and increasing mechanization of our world view and drastic social changes have alienated us from both our bodies and the physical world around us. As Matthew Arnold perceived at the beginning of our age, we are left

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[63]Milton J. Friedman, ed., *Samuel Beckett Now: Critical Approaches to His Novels, Poetry, and Plays* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 4.

> here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.[64]

These forces have weakened, if not destroyed, many of our traditional ways of viewing the world and have forced us to re-evaluate our metaphysical status in this world. Such a re-evaluation is accompanied by tension, frustration, and even a humorous absurdity; and these are the rhythms which are captured and preserved in the fiction of Samuel Beckett.

Beckett does, indeed, tamper with tradition. We saw at the beginning of this chapter, in a passage taken from *Watt*, how Beckett undermines our traditional concept of God. By having Watt and his friend perceive God in the destruction of robins and the cannibalism of rats, Beckett does not necessarily deny the existence of God; rather, he shows us that God can no longer be perceived in terms other than those of his creation, as absurd as that might be. Romantic love and other social relationships are also seen from an unusual perspective. Molloy, for instance, does not know whether he has made love to a man or a woman and is haunted by the question, "Is it true love, in the rectum? . . . Have I never known true love, after all?" (*M*. 73). Malone creates a fictional character, Moll, whose sexual attractiveness is due to her one rotten tooth which is carved into the shape of a crucifix: "But from such harmless aids what love is free?" (*MD*. 363), he asks. Molloy enjoys kicking an old man who is temporarily unconscious; Moran kills a man he does not even know; and The Unnamable finds himself "stamping under foot the

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[64]Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach," in *Poetry of the Victorian Period*, ed. Jerome Hamilton Buckley and George Benjamin Woods, 3rd ed. (Glenview, Il.: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1965), p. 499.

unrecognizable remains of my family, here a face, there a stomach"
(U. 447-48).

We can begin to understand Beckett's contempt for these commonly
accepted concepts by looking at his treatment of another staple of our
lives--language. Beckett's style--the pages-long sentences, the
disregard for traditional punctuation and capitalization, and the vir-
tually endless paragraphs--shows that he is suspicious of language as
it is normally used. This suspicion is shared by his characters. Watt,
for example, begins a process of inversion as his words fail him: "Dis
yb dis, nem owt, yad la, tin fo trap . . . " (W. 168), he says to a
friend as his world begins to become "unspeakable" (W. 85). And Molloy,
complaining of "icy meaning" explains, "All I know is what the words
know, and the dead things, and that makes a handsome little sum, with a
beginning, a middle, and an end as in the well-built phrase and the long
sonata of the dead" (M. 37). It is the static nature of language to
which Beckett objects. Life is not a well-ordered phrase, nor is it as
harmonious as a sonata; to express life as such, to impose a form upon
it, is to ignore its basic complexity. But as Malone realizes, "There is
no use indicating words, they are no shoddier than what they peddle"
(MD. 226). Words peddle concepts--like romantic love and God--and
concepts, once fixed, tend to stop the free flow of life. To reflect
life, language must be fluid, as it is for Malone: "Words and images run
riot in my head, pursuing, flying, clashing, merging, endlessly" (MD. 270).
To be genuine, life must be free of what Oates calls "the patterned
response."[65] Beckett implies that we must constantly be alert to the

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[65]Oates, p. 163.

ever-changing world and seek answers while realizing that there are none.

To do otherwise is harmful, even disgusting, as we can see from the

following passage from *Watt*:

> And yet it is useless not to seek, not to want, for when
> you cease to seek you start to find, and when you cease to
> want, then life begins to ram her fish and chips down your
> gullet until you puke, and then the puke down your gullet
> until you puke the puke, and then the puked puke until you
> begin to like it. (*W*. 44)

Kenner states accurately that Beckett "has taken on himself the

burden of one conscious that he is conscious,"[66] but we could say

further, in true Beckett style, that Beckett is conscious of the relative

nature of the consciousness of which he is conscious. Bit by bit, he

takes away our normal world--the world of bodies and God and love--until

we are left, like The Unnamable, with only our minds and their uncertainty.

When we read in *Watt* that "If there were two things that Watt loathed,

one was the earth, and the other was the sky" (*W*. 36), or when The

Unnamable rips through layers of particulars and reduces an argument to

its most general terms--"so long as this, then that" (*U*. 555)--we see a

reflection of Beckett's belief that we must get to know life on a level

deeper than surface particulars, to go beyond the immediacy of the sensory

world and reach the center of consciousness outside of time and space, so

that in the end, we will not say with Malone, "I tried to live without

knowing what I was trying" (*MD*. 266).

Beckett is "modern" in every respect--in style, theme, and content,

and in the use of the grotesque as a means of pulling out our conventional

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[66]Kenner, p. 35.

conceptual stops and forcing us to realize the relativity of the ideas we hold. But he is also modern in his particular brand of optimism, the optimism characterized by Darwin, Nietzsche, and Camus, all of whom stared into the void of a new world until they affirmed it in all of its negativity. After pulling man down from his earthly throne and tying him directly to the animal world, Darwin saw a light:

> From the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life . . . . Whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning, endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are evolving.[67]

Nietzsche did not lament the death of God; rather, he saw it as liberating man from arbitrarily imposed limitations: "Once you said 'God' when you gazed upon distant seas; but now I have taught you to say 'Superman.'"[68] Camus realized that

> Sisyphus teaches us the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks . . . [and] concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile . . . . The struggle toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.[69]

And from the obscurity surrounding the spatial, temporal, and spiritual existence of Beckett's Unnamable--"the essence of all the preceding characters"[70]--comes a haunting affirmation of life: "Where I am I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" (*U.* 577). This acceptance is happiness in the

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[67]Darwin, *Origin*, p. 374.   [68]Nietzsche, p. 181.

[69]Camus, p. 91.   [70]Oates, p. 162.

grotesque world of Samuel Beckett, for as he says in *Watt*, "To hunger, thirst, lust, every day afresh and every day in vain . . . that is the nearest we'll ever get to felicity" (*W.* 44). And despite the radical disorientation we experience while reading these strangest of modern novels, we walk away muttering, as does one of Beckett's characters, "All the same . . . life isn't such a bad old bugger" (*W.* 245).

In the Middle Ages, man attempted to subordinate his irrationality to God's rationally ordered universe. He was only partially successful--thus the tension out of which grew the grotesque. With Shaffer and Beckett we complete a radical transformation. The irrational is no longer seen in purely negative terms, but as an integral part of a full and meaningful life. Diverse as the old and new positions might seem, they are similar in their basic concerns. Medieval man lived in what was believed to be an ordered world, and his goal was to fit himself into the cosmic order and make himself acceptable to God. In contrast, today's man lives in a disordered world, and he must seek to adapt himself to the chaos, not in order to win the approval of God, but merely to survive. The enemy of the older view was disorder--like that caused by the vice-- while the enemy of the today's view is order, or rather a rigidity which decreases man's ability to meet life's multiplicity. The grotesque embodies disorder and is used to forward both views. Its ambivalently fearful qualities suited perfectly the needs of medieval moralists who wanted to frighten man into spiritual conformity. Its powerfully dis- orienting qualities make it an effective vehicle for forcing man to accept the absurdity of the human situation in the twentieth century. The grotesque itself has changed little over the centuries; the difference lies in our attitude toward it.

THE CONTINUITY OF THE GROTESQUE TRADITION

> Now the slinking serpent walks
> In mild humility,
> And the just man rages in the wilds
> Where lions roam.
> William Blake
> *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Thus far, we have implied that the function of the grotesque has evolved from one of relative simplicity to one of extreme complexity. But in many ways this idea is simplistic, for a brief recapitulation of our findings thus far will show that the grotesque has been complex from the early stages of its development. The medieval moralists were concerned with the Christian religion and its attendant morality, with the never-ending struggle between Good and Evil for control of man's soul. Since this issue was of primary importance in successful adaptation to earthly life and acceptance into heavenly life, the artists sought to embody the forces which threatened man in forms that would clearly reveal their depravity. Although the concerns of some twentieth-century writers have shifted from the religious realm of Good and Evil to a more general regard for life adjustment without reference to any particular creed, and although the characterization of the contending forces is now more psychological than visual, there is still a strong tendency to associate abnormality with moral, spiritual, and psychological error. This technique is basic to the works of William Faulkner, as we have seen. In some of the morality plays we noticed a tendency of the Vice to disguise

his visage and his identity in order to entrap mankind in his wicked snare. It is in variations on this basic technique of disguise that we see the roots of the inversion which we have found so prominent in today's literature. The Misfit, Eliot Rosewater, Alan Strang, Molloy, Malone, The Unnamed One--each possesses physical and/or psychological distortions which classify him as grotesque. These characters cannot, however, be considered in purely negative terms, for their distortions result either from extreme sensitivity or a heightened consciousness and are thus ultimately superior to many qualities of the so-called normal inhabitants around them. As the grotesque comes to embody positive characteristics, the fair-seeming normal world is shown to be inwardly grotesque, just as the morality Vice's disguise gives way to reveal his truly evil nature. Thus the inversion of the grotesque is not a purely modern phenomenon--an outgrowth of a modern tendency to negate the values of the past--for the issue is not a new one. What we are really dealing with here is appearance versus reality. Of course, we use the term "appearance" in a general sense, because we are no longer dealing with strictly visual effects. Writers have always known that things are not always what they appear to be: When viewed from the proper perspective, apparent insanity can become the only true sanity; illness, the only genuine health; evil, the nearest we can come to goodness. And the reverse is also true: Apparent sanity, health, or goodness may mask terrifying and destructive aberrations.

We can clarify these ideas and point the direction for the remainder of our study by looking at the opening cantos of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. It is appropriate to begin with this work not only because of

the time of its appearance (1590-1596) and the language and allegory which tie it to the literature of the Middle Ages, but also because of its wealth of grotesquerie.

The Faerie Queene is, in Spenser's words, "a continued allegory or dark conceit" intended to "fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline" by teaching him the "twelve moral virtues as Aristotle hath devised."[1] Since he believed that "So much more profitable and gracious is doctrine by ensample than by rule,"[2] Spenser embodied each of these virtues--at least the six of the completed books-- in a different knight who rides forth on a quest in the service of his sovereign, the Faerie Queene. Book I concerns the adventures of the Knight of the Red Cross (Holiness)[3] as he attempts to rescue the parents of Una (Truth) from the clutches of an evil dragon (Satan). The knight is, as he should be, fair in his holy armor, and Una is a "lovely lady,"[4] "pure and innocent . . . in life and every virtuous lore" (*FQ*. I.i.5).

Una and Red Cross first encounter the monster Error (general theological error), who is hideous in every respect, as Spenser's masterful description makes clear. Half-serpent, half-woman, she is "Most loathsome, filthy, foul, and full of vile disdain" (*FQ*. I.i.14). She has "poisonous dugs" and a thousand offspring "Of sundry shapes, yet all

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[1]Robert Kellogg and Oliver Steele, eds., *Edmund Spenser: Books I and II of The Faerie Queene, The Mutability Cantos, and Selections from the Minor Poetry* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1965), pp. 74-75.

[2]Ibid., p. 75.

[3]Allegorical equivalents cited for characters of *The Faerie Queene* are taken from Kellogg and Steele, pp. 15-53.

[4]Kellogg and Steele, *Faerie Queene*, I.i.4. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *FQ* and book, canto, and stanza number.

ill-favoured" (*FQ.* I.i.15). Red Cross and Error do battle, and as the knight attempts to strangle her, the monster exhibits her grotesquerie by vomiting "A flood of poison horrible and black, / Full of gobbets raw" (*FQ.* I.i.20). With masterful precision, Spenser demonstrates the complete depravity of monsters of this type: After the knight beheads Error, her offspring "flocked all about her bleeding wound / And sucked up their dying mother's blood" (*FQ.* I.i.25). They stuff themselves on her remaining flesh until they "with fulness burst / And [their] bowels [come] gushing forth" (*FQ.* I.i.26). This description is disgusting, but the underlying technique is familiar. Red Cross and Una are forces of goodness, as their beauty sumbolizes. Error is evil as her grotesquerie symbolizes. She embodies the evil of false religion and is at once frightening because she stands for eternal damnation and laughable because of her excesses. In this episode, Spenser is straightforward and traditional in his depiction of virtue and vice.

But Spenser soon begins to undermine our preconceptions. Una and Red Cross next meet "An aged sire in long black weeds y-clad . . . / Simple in show and void of malice bad" (*FQ.* I.i.29). He shares with them his "holy chapel edified," his "crystal stream," and his "sacred fountain" (*FQ.* I.i.34), and in perfect contentment, all lie down to sleep. But the goodly hermit is in actuality the arch magician Archimago (Hypocrisy), who creates "mighty charms to trouble sleepy minds" (*FQ.* I.i.36). By sorcery, the magician creates a replica of Una. This false Una first attempts to seduce the virtuous knight and then shamelessly makes love with a stranger, actually another spirit created by Archimago. Horrified at what appears to be his lady's lack of virtue, the knight deserts her

in sadness and disgust. In this episode Spenser reverses our expectations. The fair-seeming hermit is evil, while the virtuous Una is made to appear treacherous. This visual confusion is, however, only beginning.

As Red Cross flees his apparently unfaithful companion, he encounters and saves the lovely Fidessa, "A goodly lady clad in scarlet red, / Purfled with gold and pearl of rich assay" (*FQ.* I.ii.13). Her charms "much enmove his stout heroic heart" (*FQ.* I.ii.21), and he believes her "To be the fairest wight that lived yit" (*FQ.* I.ii.30). It is only after traveling with her for several days and succumbing to her sexual charms that Red Cross discovers his lover to be the false Duessa (Falsehood), a thoroughly evil ally of Archimago. We later see that although she is beautiful on the outside, her real figure is little short of hideous. Spenser's description of her grotesquerie is worthy of extended quotation:

> her misshaped parts did them appall--
> A loathly wrinkled hag, ill-favoured, old,
> Whose secret filth good manners biddeth not be told.
>
> Her crafty head was altogether bald,
> And as in hate of honorable eld,
> Was overgrown with scurf and filthy scald;
> Her teeth out of her rotten gums were felled,
> And her sour breath abominably smelled;
> Her dried dugs, like bladders lacking wind,
> Hung down, and filthy matter from them welled;
> Her wrizled skin, as rough as maple rind,
> So scabby was that would have loathed all womankind.
>
> Her nether parts, the shame of all her kind,
> My chaster muse for shame doth blush to write;
> But at her rump she growing had behind
> A fox's tail with dung all foully dight.
> For eke her feet most monstrous were in sight,
> For one of them was like an eagle's claw,
> With gripping talons armed to greedy fight,
> The other like a bear's uneven paw.
> More ugly shape yet never living creature saw.
> (*FQ.* I.viii.46,47,48)

Even though Duessa's evil nature is ultimately reflected in her repulsive form, her disguise is so effective that Red Cross is unable to see through it even while he makes love to her (*FQ*. I.vii.7).

After her desertion by Red Cross, Una fares little better in her attempts to discriminate between appearance and reality. She meets a ferocious seeming "ramping lion" (*FQ*. I.iii.5) who becomes her gentle and devoted protector. She encounters the evil Archimago, who has assumed the appearance of the Red Cross Knight. And she is caught up in a dance of satyrs "a rude, misshapen, monstrous rabblement" (*FQ*. I.vi.8)--who not only befriend her, but worship her as a goddess.

Spenser is an admitted moralist, and as such he presents a comprehensive picture of the complex dangers which face man in the world. There is obvious evil which must be faced squarely and defeated, as Red Cross defeats the hideous Error. Creatures parallel to Error include the evil giant Orgoglio (Pride), a "monstrous mass of earthly slime" (*FQ*. I.vii.9); Gluttony, a "Deformed creature, on a filthy swine" (*FQ*. I.iv.21); Lechery, "rough and black and filthy" (*FQ*. I.iv.24); and Envy, who keeps "Between his cankered teeth a venomous toad" (*FQ*. I.iv.30). There is evil disguised as good, as in Archimago and Duessa, and also the satanic Lucifera, "A maiden queen, that shone as Titan's ray, / In glistering gold and peerless precious stone" (*FQ*. I.iv.8). But there is also goodness which appears to be evil--Una appears lustful in Red Cross's dream, the gentle lion is dreadful in appearance, and the loyal satyrs are monstrous at first sight. The same pattern can be seen in the story of Fraelissa, "as fair as fair mote be" (*FQ*. I.ii.37), whom Duessa gives a "foul ugly form" (*FQ*. I.ii.38). The result of Spenser's constant shifting of the

relationship between reality and appearance is an increased awareness on the part of knight and reader, who learn that man must become sensitive to the essential nature of the forces at work in his world, as well as to their outward show. Spenser accomplishes this effect by his use of the grotesque.

Spenser uses the grotesque in both its "traditional" and "inverted" senses, and his work in this respect looks both backward and forward. At times the grotesque embodies the negative forces working to destroy man. Spenser's monsters are virtual monomaniacs who allow one element of their existence to dominate their lives. This limitation is reflected in their names: Error means just what it says; Orgoglio is Italian for "pride." This one-sidedness they share with the Vices of medieval drama and, in a more subtle way, with some modern characters like Jason Compson and Flem Snopes who are obsessed with material gain and whose depravity is revealed in their allegorical names. When Spenser varies from such a straight-forward depiction, he partakes of a tradition which we first noted in the tendency of the Vices to disguise their true natures and extends into modern literature. Outwardly beautiful, Duessa and Lucifera epitomize spiritual ugliness. Ostensibly lovable, Flannery O'Connor's "grandmother" is shallow and bigotted. Seemingly false, Una is inwardly chaste and faithful. Obviously disturbed, Alan Strang lives with an intensity envied by rational man. And what is true of individual characters is also true of broader effects. Indeed, it is not difficult to see similarities in the predicament of Una and Red Cross as they ride through an enchanted forest unable to trust the evidence of their senses and that of Martin Dysart or Malone or The Unnamed One as they struggle in the metaphysical

darkness of a world rendered suddenly and hopelessly inexplicable. The contexts are radically different, but the devices are similar.

To assert these similarities is not to deny the originality of modern writers but rather to show that they are not isolated from the literary tradition. In the previous chapters we examined the two ends of the English literary tradition. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that the techniques of the grotesque are continuous. We proceed by discussing representative works from the intervening literary periods because time and space do not permit an examination of every appearance of the grotesque from 1500 to 1900. Nor is it necessary. Placing the grotesque in its proper relationship to the dominant philosophical trends of each period is work for many hands. Here we need only to show that grotesquerie has never been absent from our literature and that the grotesque in the intervening periods resembles that which we have already studied. As we travel from the Middle Ages to the modern world, we are like tourists on a sight-seeing bus--although we cannot stop at every landmark, we can visit the major ones and note areas worthy of more extended visitation.

In the literature studied thus far, we have seen that a major technique in the manifestation of the grotesque is that of showing how simultaneously frightening and laughable a figure can be when obsessed. The Vice of medieval drama is comical yet fearful because he personifies a force, reflected in his allegorical name, which chokes out other elements of a rounded existence. The same pattern can be seen in Spenser's monsters like Error and Orgoglio. In modern literature, characters such as Faulkner's Compson brothers betray similar limitations. Benjy is caught

by idiocy in a perpetual, purely sensual, temporal present; Quentin is trapped by his intellect in an abstract world which collapses as it encounters concrete reality; Jason languishes in a world of bitterness which makes him vengeful and avaricious. These grotesque characters are used as counterpoints to others who embody the forces of "good" or at least of "adaptability." Virtue is opposed to vice; the Red Cross Knight to Error; Disley to Benjy, Quentin, and Jason. The purpose of the contrast is to show the desirability of virtue while ridiculing vice. These techniques can also be seen in Ben Jonson's plays.

Jonson's personification of the "humours" is the Renaissance equivalent of the compulsive behavior which we have been discussing. The belief in the influence of the humours upon the human psyche grew out of the philosophy of the ancient Greeks, who believed that matter was made up of four elements--earth, air, fire, and water.[5] This theory of the four elements was soon expanded, particularly in the works of Galen, to cover physiology, with the result that the body was believed to be controlled by the balance or lack of balance of the four bodily humours-- blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile--each of which corresponded to one of the basic elements of matter. Like air, blood was hot and moist; like water, phlegm was cold and moist; like fire, yellow bile was hot and dry; and like earth, black bile was cold and dry. An excess of any of these qualities of hot and cold, moist and dry was believed to be

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[5]Henry L. Snuggs, "The Humourous Character in English Comedy, 1596-1642. With an Outline for a Continuation for the Years 1642-1700," Diss. Duke University, 1934, p. 44. The following discussion of Jonson's comedy and the concept of the humours owes much to this fine study.

the cause of disease. But the theory went further: The humours were
believed to give off vapors which rose to the brain and there affected
the personality. Henry Snuggs explains:

> Whether the preponderance of one or more humours produced a
> disease or not, the bodily constitution was thought always
> to vary according to the proportion in which the four humours
> were mixed. Any particular mixture was called . . . the
> complexion, or "temperament." If the humours were present in
> true proportions, the temperament was perfect; if one or the
> other predominated, according to which one ruled, the
> temperament was sanguine, phlegmatic, bilious, or melancholy.[6]

Since each of these humourous temperaments had behavioral correlatives--
sanguine man was beneficent, amorous, joyful; phlegmatic man was dull and
cowardly, etc.--the humours became associated with psychology as well as
physiology and began an evolution in meaning which came to fruition in
Jonson's comedies.

Jonson's famous definition of humours is found in the Induction
to *Every Man Out of His Humour*:

> in euery humane body
> The choller, melancholy, flegme, and bloud,
> By reason that they flow continually
> In some one part, and are not continent,
> Receiue the name of Humours. Now thus farre
> It may, by Metaphore, apply it selfe
> Vnto the generall disposition:
> As when some one peculiar quality
> Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw
> All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
> In their confluctions, all to runne one way,
> This may be truly said to be a humour.[7]

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[6]Snuggs, p. 41.

[7]Ben Jonson, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, in *Ben Jonson*, ed.
C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson (1927; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press,
1954), III, 431-32.

"By Metaphore," then, Jonson could apply the old idea of the humours to his particular conception of comedy. Like most writers of his time, Jonson was concerned with morality. In his *Discoveries* he argues that the "good poet" must possess the "exact knowledge of all the vertues, and their Contraries; with the ability to render the one lov'd, the other hated, by his proper embattling them."[8] The humours concept allowed him properly to embattle these forces--he could create monomaniacal "humourous" characters who embodied the particular personal and social ills he wanted to ridicule, and he could oppose these characters to others whose balanced humours produced more desirable traits.

In developing this comic theory, Jonson drew on other traditions besides that of the physiological humours. One of the more important of these is character-writing, especially as practiced by Theophrastus, the third-century B.C. Greek philosopher. Theophrastus' "characters" were based upon Aristotle's doctrine of the mean.[9] Aristotle describes the man of perfect virtue (the goal, one may recall, of *The Faerie Queene*) as the standard against which the morality of other men is to be measured. With this standard established, the extremes could be defined and their shortcomings demonstrated. Snuggs describes the basic method:

> Theophrastus starts with a definition of some social fault--
> Boorishness, Flattery, Garrulity, and the like--and then
> proceeds to consider this social fault as embodied in a
> representative man, and to describe it by an enumeration of
> what this man will do.[10]

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[8]Alan C. Dessen, *Jonson's Moral Comedy* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1971), p. 243.

[9]Snuggs, p. 20.   [10]Ibid.

Jonson follows this tradition in dramatic form by clothing his abstract social or personal aberration in "the habit of a man, and . . . showing how this man, who is really the embodiment of the trait, will act, what he will do and say."[11]

The similarities between this theory of comedy and that of the English morality plays are obvious and immediately relevant to our present study. Jonson's characters, whose spirits "runne one way," have definite affinities with the Vices of medieval drama. Jonson himself makes the association explicit in *The Staple of News*, in which Mirth, Expectation, and Tatle discuss the differences between the allegorical mode of the past and the new approach in which the old types are given more realistic trappings:

> Mirth: That was the old way . . . when *Iniquity* came in
> like *Hokos Pokos*, in a Iuglers ierkin, with false skirts,
> like the *Knaue of Clubs*! But now they are attir'd like men
> and women o' the times, the Vices, male and female.[12]

Jonson thus wrote modified moralities. Although his characters embody qualities similar to those of the Vices, they are endowed with the characteristics of typical Renaissance Londoners. The result is, as Baskervill points out, "A new conception of character treatment, that which combines the study of a [social] type and the study of an abstract folly or vice."[13] Other critics agree on the influence of the tradition. O. J. Campbell, for instance, in describing Jonson's characters as "creatures ridden by idiosyncrasy," says, "Characters much like these

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[11]Snuggs, p. 28.   [12]Quoted in Dessen, p. 40.

[13]Charles Reed Baskervill, *English Elements in Jonson's Early Comedy* (New York: Gordian Press, 1967), p. 40.

'humourous' figures first appear in some of the morality plays. Abstract vices or virtues, as soon as they became only a little humanized, developed a family likeness to humor types."[14] The influence of the moralities is not, however, limited to characterization but is also reflected in Jonson's themes. Baskervill notes that Jonson's study of the humours includes

> the treatment of Envy, Wrath, Drunkenness, Avarice--indeed some phase of all the Seven Deadly Sins except perhaps Sloth . . . . In fact, all the vices, the follies, the manias, the fads and fashions of the day as indicative of mental or moral weakness are satirized, and humour is the term Jonson uses to cover them all.[15]

And humour, as opposed to "vice" or "sin," is indeed an appropriate term to express the foibles of an increasingly secular society.

The influence of the humours--"the partial eccentricity [that] becomes a whole mania,"[16] as John Enck calls it--can be seen in almost all of Jonson's comedies, particularly *Every Man In His Humour*, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, and *Cynthia's Revels*. Indeed, in *Every Man In*, we get perhaps the clearest description of the process by which a humour, in this instance jealousy, asserts its dominance over an individual:

> Like a pestilence, it doth infect
> The houses of the brain. First it begins
> Solely to work upon the phantasy,
> Filling her seat with such pestiferous air,
> As soon corrupts the judgment; and from thence,
> Sends like contagion to the memory:

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[14] Oscar James Campbell, *Shakespeare's Satire* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1943), p. 66.

[15] Baskervill, p. 37.

[16] John J. Enck, *Jonson and the Comic Truth* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1957), p. 48.

> Still each to other giving the infection,
> Which as a subtle vapour spreads itself
> Confusedly through every sensitive part,
> Till not a thought or motion in the mind
> Be free from the black poison of suspect.[17]

These early plays, however, "portray, not the sterner vices, but rather the incongruities, follies, foibles, absurdities, frailties, and infirmities of the times,"[18] and thus fall short of the serious, decidedly ominous tone which must offset the pure comedy to create the grotesque effect. One play which does combine the humorous characters and serious implications is *Volpone*, which Enck calls "the most brilliantly executed comedy in English."[19]

The dominant humour of the play is avarice, which in one way or another disrupts the lives of all the main characters. Volpone, unmarried and childless, has no heirs to his estate and feigns illness approaching death in order to extort, through the wily stratagems of his parasite Mosca, expensive gifts from those who hope to become his heir. Volpone's avarice is made immediately clear by his opening prayer to gold:

> Hail the world's soul, and mine! More glad than is
> The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun
> Peep through the horns of the celestial Ram,
> Am I, to view thy splendour, darkening his;
> . . . .
>   Dear saint,
> Riches, the dumb god, that giv'st all men tongues,
> That canst do nought, and yet mak'st men do all things;
> The price of souls; even hell, with thee to boot,
> Is made worth heaven! Thou art virtue, fame,

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[17]Ben Jonson, *Every Man in His Humour*, in *Ben Jonson*, eds. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson (1927; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), III, 325.

[18]Snuggs, p. 59.   [19]Enck, p. 111.

> Honour and all things else! Who can get thee,
> He shall be noble, valiant, honest, wise--[20]

Mosca's avaricious humour is also revealed early, as he says, "Riches
are in fortune / A greater good, than wisdom is in nature" (V. I.i.28-29).
Similar attitudes are reflected in the minor characters, particularly
those who clamor for Volpone's attention and his fortune. Voltore, a
lawyer, is led to betray his honorable profession and deliver a spurious
self-serving argument before the Avocatori, the Venetian judiciary.
Corbaccio, an elderly citizen, tries to convince Volpone of his love by
disinheriting his beloved son Bonario. And Corvino, a Venetian merchant,
overcomes extreme jealousy and offers his wife Celia as a sexual sacrifice
to the whims of Volpone. All for money. The general condition of these
characters is summed up by one of the Venetian judges: "These possess
wealth, as sick men possess fevers, / Which trulier may be said to possess
them" (V. V.xii.101-102). Celia and Bonario stand in attractive contrast
to these money-mad characters, and their faith in their innocence and
honor--"heaven . . . never fails the innocent" (V. IV.vi.17), Celia
declares--eventually leads to the exposure of the greed of the other
characters, who in desperation turn upon one another in the final scene,
each insuring that he will not fall alone.

The strong influence of the medieval morality upon these besotted
characters has been noted by several critics. Philip Brockbank identifies
Mosca as the equivalent of the Vices Hypocrisy and Dissimulation and notes

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[20]Ben Jonson, *Volpone, or The Fox*, ed. Philip Brockbank (London:
Ernest Benn, 1968), I.i.3-6,21-27. Hereafter cited parenthetically by
V and act, scene, and line number.

the presence of several of the deadly sins:

> Pride, for example, is assimilated into Voltore's forensic
> vanity, Anger finds occasion in Corvino's jealousy and
> lechery . . . Envy, Gluttony, and Sloth are subsumed into
> the pervasive parasitic avarice, the preeminent vice of
> the acquisitive society.[21]

Alan Dessen associates Covino with Covetousness, Volpone and Mosca with

the "vices who traditionally impose their will upon a world which by its

acquiescence and complicity has granted them power," and Celia and

Bonario with Heavenly Man, Just, Faithful Few, and Simplicity."[22]

The grotesque effect of this play arises from the unresolved

conflict between laughter and fear. On one level, the play is very funny

as we see the stock responses of one after another of these greedy

Venetians as they succumb to Mosca's clever stratagems. But this effect

is undercut by the serious nature of the issues involved. From Volpone's

opening prayer until his defeat--"I'm caught in my own noose" (V. V.x.13)--

the institutions upon which society is based are brought into serious

question. Corbaccio violates the sacred trust between father and son;

Corvino sacrifices his own honor and his wife's fidelity; Volpone is

narrowly prevented from committing rape; and all conspire to undermine the

order represented by Venetian law. These issues are revealed in Celia's

desperate cry,

> Is that, which ever was a cause of life,
> Now placed beneath the basest circumstance?
> And modesty an exile made, for Money?
> (V. III.vii.136-38)

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[21]Brockbank, p. xi.

[22]Dessen, pp. 81, 88.

Although the physical appearance of these characters tells us little about them, their sinister nature is accentuated by their names. Opposed to the heavenly Celia and Bonario the good, are Volpone the fox, Mosca the fly, Voltore the vulture, Corbaccio the raven, and Corvino the crow.[23] Like the half-human medieval grotesques, these characters assume animal-like characteristics as they fight virtually "tooth and claw" for possession of unearned wealth. Such a situation has led Enck to compare the play to "a barbaric or medieval frieze in which the human and the bestial wantonly mingle"[24] and Henry Snuggs to comment upon "the monster-like characters."[25]

Volpone is, in characters and situation, definitely grotesque--beginning in the spirit of comedy, it "skirts around the region of sardonic disillusion to impinge upon the tragic."[26] And its grotesquerie is of the traditional type. The lines between Good and Evil are clearly drawn between Volpone on the one hand and Celia on the other. Vice has evolved into humour, but the thematic implications remain the same in what Dessen calls this "disturbing yet brilliantly entertaining spectacle of man's ability to destroy or degrade himself."[27]

A more complex use of the traditions under consideration is seen in Shakespeare's creation of Sir John Falstaff, in *King Henry IV, I* and *II*, and in *King Henry V*.[28] Collectively these plays trace the growth of

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[23]Brockbank, p. 11.   [24]Enck, p. 118.   [25]Snuggs, p. 143.

[26]Enck, p. 118.   [27]Dessen, p. 102.

[28]See A. C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (1909; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. 248. I agree with Bradley in seeing the Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as fundamentally different from that of the other plays and therefore exclude him from consideration here.

Henry, Prince of Wales, from the "madcap" Prince Hal to the glorious Henry V, but to many readers and critics the most interesting aspect of the plays is the changing relationship between Hal and Falstaff, his early mentor and boon companion. As a youth, Hal immerses himself with Falstaff and his companions in the reckless life of Eastcheap, but upon the ascension to the throne, Hal rejects his former way of life and his former companions. With the brutal line, "I know thee not, old man,"[29] Hal turns away from Falstaff, touching off a critical controversy that continues to the present day. Does Hal's seemingly heartless rejection of Falstaff reflect the pragmatic wisdom necessary to a new king, or does it make Hal a hypocrite worthy of our scorn? The question has never been satisfactorily answered, and we will not answer it here. We can, however, gain some insight into this issue and into our study of the grotesque by realizing that it is Falstaff's dual nature--his grotesquerie, as it were--that is the heart of the problem. Falstaff is at once "the walking embodiment of everything the play rejects"[30] and "the most substantial comic character that ever was invented,"[31] and these two conflicting elements are so hopelessly intertwined that no straightforward judgment of Falstaff's character and function in the play is possible.

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[29]William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of King Henry the Fourth*, in *Shakespeare: Complete Works*, ed. W. J. Craig (1905; rpt. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), V.v.51. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *2HIV* and act, scene, and line number.

[30]Norman N. Holland, ed., *William Shakespeare: The Second Part of [King] Henry IV*, The Signet Classic Shakespeare (New York: New American Library, 1965), p. xxxix.

[31]William Hazlitt, "Henry IV in Two Parts," from *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, 2nd ed. (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1918), rpt. Ibid., p. 191.

In this dual role, Falstaff looks backward toward the traditions of the morality Vice and forward toward the functional complexity of modern grotesquerie.

Falstaff's negative characteristics are evident in his physical appearance and in his moral outlook. He is an "oily rascal"[32] who "lards the lean earth as he walks along" (*1HIV*. II.ii.120). He is "as fat as butter" (*1HIV*. II.iv.568), "a tun of man . . . that bolting hutch of beastiness, that swoll'n parcel of dropsies, that huge bombard of sack, that stuff'd cloakbag of guts, that roasted Manningtree ox with pudding in his belly" (*1HIV*. II.iv.499-505). His moral qualities are little better. Falstaff is a drunkard, or as Hal says, he is "fat-witted, with drinking of old sack" (*1HIV*. I.ii.2-3); he is a thief, as is clearly shown in the Gadshill incident; and he tells countless lies, the most famous of which concerns the death of the valiant Hotspur.

These physical and moral abnormalities qualify Falstaff as a direct descendant of the medieval Vice. In fact, as Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch notes, "The whole of the business [of Henry IV] is built on the old morality structure."[33] In these terms, Falstaff is seen as Vice, Hal as Humanity, and the Lord Chief Justice, whom Hal ultimately chooses over Falstaff, as Virtue. Like his medieval counterpart, Falstaff is a seducer of mankind, an enemy of all that is normally considered virtuous. Hal

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[32] William Shakespeare, *The First Part of King Henry the Fourth*, in *Shakespeare: Complete Works*, ed. W. J. Craig (1905; rpt. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), II.iv.583. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *1HIV* and act, scene, and line number.

[33] Quoted in J. Dover Wilson, *The Fortunes of Falstaff* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), p. 131n.

realizes this, albeit light-heartedly, when he calls Falstaff "that villainous abominable misleader of Youth . . . that old white-bearded Satan" (*1HIV*. II.iv.515-16); "that reverend Vice, that grey iniquity, that father ruffian, that vanity in years" (*1HIV*. II.iv.505-07); and "the tutor and the feeder of my riots" (*2HIV*. V.v.67). This relationship has been noted by other critics besides Quiller-Couch. J. Dover Wilson sees Falstaff as the Shakespearean equivalent not only of the morality Vice but also of the Devil of the miracle plays, the Riot of the interlude, the Lord of Misrule, the Fool, the Buffoon, and the Jester.[34] Bernard Spivack shows Falstaff's direct kinship with vice figures in specific moralities--Sensual Appetite in *The Four Elements*; Gluttony and Pride in *Nature*--and calls him the "composite image of . . . all the rest of the fleshly sins."[35] These parallels between the moralities and Shakespeare's plays justify, on one level, Hal's rejection of Falstaff: Hal chooses the virtue represented by the Lord Chief Justice's strict adherence to the law and repudiates the fleshly irresponsibility--the vice--of the Epicurean Falstaff.

Parallels between Falstaff and the humour characters cannot be so neatly drawn, however, because the protean Falstaff continually eludes classification. John W. Draper attempts unsuccessfully to show that Falstaff's rejection is justified by the fact that he is a representative of phlegmatic man: He says, "a Falstaff so rotund and therefore so

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[34]Wilson, pp. 18-20.

[35]Bernard Spivack, "Falstaff and the Psychomachia," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 8 (1957), 456.

phlegmatic, could not to Shakespeare's audience have been the fine and

valiant soldier" that modern critics have tried to make him.[36] Draper

quickly runs into trouble with this assertion, however. Since he

identifies phlegmatic man as "soft and sluggish of body, timid of spirit,

and often dull of mind,"[37] two-thirds of his definition does not apply.

Who would associate the exuberant Falstaff with either timidity or

stupidity? Draper sees his argument breaking down and tries to save it by

allowing Falstaff's character to include the choleric humour, albeit an

assumed one: "Falstaff, indeed, added hypocrisy to debauchery, cowardice

and bragging impudence, and so, to accord with his profession of

swashbuckler-in-chief, assumed a choler though he had it not."[38] This

qualification deals a fatal blow to Draper's argument. Indeed, if the

Elizabethans knew no more about the significance of the various humours than

Draper does, our present discussion would be unnecessary. Draper flounders

because he overlooks the obvious answer which Shakespeare provides as Hal

calls Falstaff "a trunk of humours" (*1HIV*. II.iv.500). Eleanor Badgett

perceptively notes that this phrase "appears to have been carefully chosen

to suggest that in one character the playwright intended to portray most

of the excesses, or humours, which in a prince would presage unworthy

kingship."[39] But the phrase has much broader implications, for it implies

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[36]John W. Draper, *The Humors and Shakespeare's Characters* (Durham,
N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1945), p. 32.

[37]Ibid., p. 35.   [38]Ibid., p. 38.

[39]Eleanor Denslow Badgett, "Shakespeare and Jonson: 'Humours' in
Shakespeare's Plays Before 1598," Thesis Univ. of Tennessee, 1960,
p. 101.

that Falstaff avoids traditional classification--no one humour can adequately describe him. It is this quality that makes him appear so lifelike and that makes him the object of our fascination. It is this quality also that makes Hal's unqualified rejection of the fat knight seem so brutal.

For despite these negative qualities, the audience admires Falstaff; indeed, many love him. If he is a Vice figure, he is no common one, for his downfall is not met with the traditional laughter of the moralities, nor is he dragged from the stage screaming and roaring. Instead, he tries quietly to save his dignity--"I shall be sent for in private to him. Look you, he must seem thus to the world" (*2HIV.* V.v.82-84)--and when unsuccessful, he dies of a heart "fracted and corroborate."[40] "The king has killed his heart" (*HV.* II.i.92-93), Mistress Quickly rightly declares.

Falstaff's attractiveness lies in his wit and his exuberance. With his love of ease--"Come, sing me a bawdy song; make me merry" (*1HIV.* III.iii.15-16)--and his seductive wit--"Thou knowest in the state of innocency Adam fell, and what should poor Jack Falstaff do in the days of villainy" (*1HIV.* III.iii.184-85)--this "sweet beef" (*1HIV.* III.iii.198) wins our affection. His appeal is intellectual as well as emotional, for in important ways Falstaff acts as a foil to some of the excesses of other characters. We can see this process by comparing Falstaff's views of

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[40]William Shakespeare, *The Life of King Henry the Fifth*, in *Shakespeare: Complete Works*, ed. W. J. Craig (1905; rpt. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), II.i.131. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *HV* and act, scene, and line number.

honor with those of some other characters.

The valiant but impetuous and somewhat naive Hotspur has an inflated view of honor, as we see in his famous speech:

> By heaven, methinks it were an easy leap
> To pluck bright honor from the pale-faced moon,
> Or dive into the bottom of the deep,
> Where fathom line could never touch the ground,
> And pluck up drowned honor by the locks,
> So he that doth redeem her hence might wear
> Without corrival all her dignities.
> (*1HIV*. I.iii.201-07)

In contrast to such rhetorical grandeur, Falstaff shows, with an appealing, earthy logic, that these "dignities" are not always desirable, nor are they so easily obtained. "I like not such grinning honor as Sir Walter hath" (*1HIV*. V.iii.62-63), says Falstaff as he stands over a dead enemy. He elaborates his views in another famous soliloquy:

> Can honor set a leg? . . . Or an arm? . . . Or
> take away the grief of a wound? What is honor?
> Air—a trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that
> died a Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth
> he hear it? No. 'Tis insensible then? Yea,
> to the dead. (*1HIV*. V.i.133-40)

And, in immortal lines, Falstaff shows that life—full, rich, exuberant life—is more valuable than hollow abstractions: "The better part of valour is discretion, in the which better part I have saved my life" (*1HIV*. V.iv.121-23). In a similar vein, Falstaff's continual lying seems harmless beside John of Lancaster's breach of honor toward the rebels who, believing the battle to be over, dismiss their troops only to be arrested as traitors, or that of the hypocritical Hal who reveals in the opening scene his intention to reject his bosom companions but who leads them to believe him loyal.

With these attractive characteristics, the fat knight is so lovable that many readers share his sentiment, "Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world" (*2HIV*. II.iv.56-57). Indeed, it is, as M. A. Shaaber points out, "Only the sternest self-control [that] enables us to remember, as we laugh at Falstaff's drollery, that he is really a liar, a sponger, a glutton, a drunkard, a thief, and much more that we disapprove of."[41] But remember it we must, for these negative qualities, although attractive in a harmless knight, would ill-adorn a new king. "True princeliness," Norman Holland rightly asserts, "calls for [the] ability to trust in the larger order, to achieve identity by the very act of curbing the self and its appetites and being merged into the greater plan."[42] Historically speaking, Hal makes the right decision, but aesthetically, the issues are not so clear. Falstaff is evil, and thus there is justice in Samuel Johnson's view that

> the moral to be drawn from this representation is that no man
> is more dangerous than he that with a will to corrupt hath
> the power to please; and that neither wit nor honesty ought
> to think themselves safe with such company when they see Harry
> seduced by Falstaff.[43]

But there is a real question whether Harry is actually seduced, and whether there is not also a touch of evil in Hal's seeming hypocrisy, as he changes all too suddenly from the gay young prince who shouts, "Where shall we take a purse to-morrow, Jack?" (*1HIV*. I.ii.110-111), to the stern sovereign who declares unflinchingly, "I know thee not, old man" (*2HIV*. V.v.52). In fact, we might well ask whether the lack of compassion

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[41]M. A. Shaaber, ed., *William Shakespeare: The First Part of King Henry the Fourth*, The Pelican Shakespeare (Baltimore: Penguin, 1957), p. 21.

[42]Holland, p. xxxvii.   [43]Quoted in J. Dover Wilson, p. 14.

evidenced by this latter statement might not show a deficiency in an otherwise glorious king. At any rate, we can see at least some justice in Hazlitt's lament: "The truth is, that we never could forgive the Prince's treatment of Falstaff."[44]

It is the duality of response indicated above that pushes us beyond the limits of traditional grotesquerie and shows Shakespeare's affinities with some of our twentieth-century writers. The original Vice was attractive but not so attractive that his discomfiture was bemoaned for centuries. The humour characters evoked the type of straightforward response that Falstaff constantly eludes. If Shakespeare was attempting to write strictly in the traditions established by the moralities and the humour comedies, then we must agree with Bradley that in his creation of Falstaff, Shakespeare "overshot his mark. He created so extraordinary a being, and fixed him so firmly on his intellectual throne, that when he sought to dethrone him he could not."[45] But Shakespeare was a conscious artist, and in his creation of the grotesque Falstaff--whose spirit we love, despite our knowledge of his dangerous vices--he was attempting to make a historical situation come to life as completely and honestly as possible. He seems even to cloud the moral issues deliberately by making Falstaff so appealing, by showing Hal's hypocrisy in dealing with Falstaff, and by attributing the fat knight's death to the cold-heartedness of the king. After the death of Falstaff, Nym says, "The king is a good king: but it must be as it may" (*HV*. II.i.132-34), and in this statement of

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[44]Hazlitt, p. 198.   [45]Bradley, p. 259.

acceptance, we begin to see the breadth of Shakespeare's understanding. The issues of the play, like those of the life it attempts to portray, are not clearcut. Falstaff is evil, but his evil is attractive in comparison to that of the world around him. Hal is good, but it is goodness without the saving grace of humanity. If we compare this situation with that of *Volpone*, in which the moral issues are clear, with Volpone embodying pure evil and Celia personifying heavenly good, we can see that in his deliberate moral ambiguity, Shakespeare is closer in spirit to such modern writers as O'Connor, Vonnegut, Shaffer, and Beckett than he is to medieval moralists.

Many readers note similar thematic ambiguity in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Although written to "justify the ways of God to men,"[46] the poem, as some see it, works more nearly to sing the praises of Satan. William Blake, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, says that Milton "wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, . . . because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it."[47] Percy Shelley echoes this sentiment in his *Defense of Poetry*. After praising "the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan," Shelley states flatly that

> It is a mistake to suppose that he could ever have been
> intended for the popular personification of evil . . . .
> Milton's Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his

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[46] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey Press, 1957), I.26. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *PL* and book and line number.

[47] William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *Blake's Poems and Prophecies*, ed. Max Plowman, Everyman's Library, No. 792 (1927; rpt. New York: Dutton, 1970), p. 44.

> God as one who perseveres in some purpose, which he has
> conceived to be excellent, in spite of adversity and
> torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted
> triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy.[48]

Milton's Satan is, indeed, magnificently drawn, but it does not neces-
sarily follow that he thus becomes the hero of *Paradise Lost*. A brief
look at the poem and some critical views of it will show that Blake,
Shelley, and other Satan-sympathizers are reading their own poem, not
Milton's great epic, and that in his creation of Satan, Milton wrote in
the mainstream of the grotesque tradition.

Those who praise Satan's heroism rely mostly upon his appearance in
Books I and II. After an unsuccessful rebellion against God, "th'
Omnipotent to arms" (*PL*. I.49), Satan and his followers are

> Hurl'd headlong flaming from th' Ethereal Sky
> With hideous ruin and combustion down
> To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
> In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire. (*PL*. I.45-48)

But Satan, though "racked with deep despair" (*PL*. I.45-48), refuses to
yield in spirit to the power of God. He refuses to "repent or change"
(*PL*. I.96) and attributes his bitterness toward God to a "sense of injured
merit" (*PL*. I.98). In rhetoric worthy of Thomas Paine or Tennyson's
Ulysses, Satan rouses his stricken companions and holds out hope for
future accomplishment:

> What though the field be lost?
> All is not lost: the unconquerable will,
> And study of revenge, immortal hate,
> And courage never to submit or yield:
> And what is else not to be overcome? (*PL*. I.105-09)

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[48]Quoted in Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. Angus Davidson
(New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933), p. 57.

With tragic intensity and seemingly heroic acceptance--"Be it so"

(*PL*. I.245)--Satan bids farewell to his former life and steels himself

for the hardships ahead:

> Farewell, Happy fields,
> Where joy forever dwells! Hail horrors! hail,
> Infernal world! and thou, profoundest Hell,
> Receive thy new possessor, one who brings
> A mind not to be changed by place or time.
> The mind is its own place, and in itself
> Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.
> (*PL*. I.249-55)

After war on man is decided upon and someone must volunteer to "tempt

with wandering feet / The dark, unbottomed, infinite abyss" (*PL*. I.404-05)

in order to locate God's new creation, Satan again holds forth heroically:

> I should ill become this throne, O peers,
> And this imperial sovereignty, adorned
> With splendor, armed with power, if aught proposed
> And judged of public moment, in the shape
> Of difficulty or danger, could deter
> Me from attempting. (*PL*. II.445-50)

This behavior is indeed impressive. Why does Milton permit his

villain to display such glory? Blake and Shelley think that it is

because Milton was on Satan's side. A. J. Waldock, while not believing

Milton to be a Satanist, thinks that he lost control of Satan because of

his "inexperience in the assessment of narrative problems," and that he

"was not in a position to appreciate [Satan's] full complexity."[49] This

is an interesting point, though rather presumptuous, and for those who

choose to trust Milton's narrative experience over Waldock's, there are

other answers. To C. S. Lewis, Satan is Milton's best drawn character

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[49] A. J. A. Waldock, *Paradise Lost and Its Critics* (1947; rpt. Cloucester, Ma.: Peter Smith, 1959), p. 65.

because "he is incomparably easier to draw";

> To make a character worse than oneself [Lewis writes] it
> is only necessary to release imaginatively from control
> some of the bad passions which, in real life, are always
> straining at the leash; the Satan, the Iago, the Becky
> Sharp, within each of us, is always there and only too
> ready, the moment the leash is slipped, to come out and
> have in our books the holiday we try to deny in our lives.[50]

This too is an interesting point, but we might note that if all our "bad passions" are as strong and glorious as Milton's, we might truly be, as Blake suggests, of the "Devil's party without knowing it." John M. Steadman sees Satan's character resulting from the traditions in which Milton was bound to write. *Paradise Lost* is an epic, and "since Satan is an epic character, the poet must present him in a manner consistent with epic decorum."[51] Milton is successful; his "fiend does not appear out of place in a *heroic* poem." Milton had also to consider the Bible and to make his villain consistent with "Isaiah's vainglorious Lucifer," "the belligerent Satan of Revelation,"[52] and the "wily seducer of Eve and the future tempter of Job and Christ."[53] So his character had perforce to be complex, even grand. Steadman's argument is plausible and enlightening, but we might ask whether Milton did not have similar traditions to uphold in writing about God, and if so, why his picture of the Almighty is so flat. A much better explanation of Satan's enigmatic glory is suggested by David Daiches, who notes Milton's deliberate attempt to show

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[50]C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942; rpt. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961), p. 100.

[51]John M. Steadman, *Milton's Epic Characters: Image and Idol* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1968), p. 196.

[52]Ibid.   [53]Ibid.

the true nature of evil:

> Satan is a great figure, and he is meant to be: evil is
> not slight or trivial--nor unfortunately, is it always
> unattractive . . . . It is just because high-sounding
> rhetoric can so easily make the worse appear the better
> reason, and that man so easily thrills to grandiose rantings
> about honor and revenge uttered with all the mock passion
> and theatricality of a Nuremberg rally, that Satan is so
> great a danger.[54]

Satan is attractive because evil is attractive. Milton knew this. But
this does not mean, as some would have it, that he himself was evil or
Satanic. Indeed, Milton's real attitude toward Satan becomes clear as
we trace the fiend's development after Books I and II.

The key is found in Satan's soliloquy to the sun in Book IV. Beset
with "horror and doubt" (*PL*. IV.18), Satan begins to lament the "pride
and worse ambition" (*PL*. IV.40) that has separated him from "Heaven's
matchless King" (*PL*. IV.41): "He deserved no such return / From me"
(*PL*. IV.42-43). Unhappy and alone, the Satan of this book reveals that
his public grandeur, which so many readers admire, is mere show, and
that he is torn with remorse for his rebellious nature:

> Me miserable! which way shall I fly
> Infinite wrath and infinite despair?
> Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell.
> (*PL*. IV.73-75)

Such intense suffering would gain our sympathy if it did not result in a
resolution to seek evil as an end in itself. "All good to me is lost;
Evil, be thou my good" (*PL*. IV.109-10). Milton shows further limitations
of this "artificer of fraud . . . / That practiced falsehood under saintly

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[54]David Daiches, *Milton* (London: Hutchinson Univ. Library, 1957),
pp. 153-54.

show" (*PL.* IV.121-22) by showing the fiend's behavior to be little better than that of a spoiled child who, not having his way, wants merely to make everyone as unhappy as he is. Satan corrupts Adam and Eve just to cause them misery:

> [I do not] hope to be myself less miserable
> By what I seek, but others to make such
> As I, though thereby worse to me redound.
> (*PL.* IX.126-28)

He does it for "spite" (*PL.* IX.177); he has no pleasure "Save what is in destroying" (*PL.* IX.478). And this viciousness is so ingrained that it overwhelms his attraction to Adam and Eve, "whom my thoughts pursue / With wonder, and could love" (*PL.* V.362-63), and leads to the fall of man. Some may still admire Satan--"Each to his taste,"[55] C. S. Lewis says--but we are safe in assuming that Milton did not share this admiration.

In fact, A. J. Waldock is offended by the negative treatment which Milton gives Satan in the later books of the poem. He feels that Milton wrote better than he intended--making Satan a bit too attractive--and then had to resort to cheap authorial tricks to keep from undermining his purpose: "Satan, in short, does not degenerate: he is degraded."[56] But other observers realize that Satan has in some degree been degenerate throughout the poem, as is revealed in his comic characteristics. According to C. S. Lewis, Satan is comic because of his faulty logic; he suggests that the fiend's real motto should be "nonsense be thou my sense."[57] In support of this contention Lewis refers to Satan's assertion

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[55]Lewis, p. 103.   [56]Waldock, p. 83.   [57]Lewis, p. 99.

that hell is so undesirable that no one would want to usurp his throne
(*PL.* II.16-30) and rightly shows the deficiency in logic: that "a
stability based on perfect misery" must sustain such misery in order to
sustain itself.[58] There is logic in Lewis's argument, but Satan can
easily be defended. He was trying to arouse the emotions of his subjects--
to "fire them up," so to speak--not to appeal to their intellect, and he
accomplishes his purpose effectively. Can we ask more? John E. Seaman
also sees Satan as comic, but he sees the comedy arising from the "self-
deception" that results "when a character's conception of himself
overreaches what he actually is."[59] We have seen, however, that Satan
is not self-deceived. In his soliloquy to the sun in Book IV, he all-
too-painfully realizes his actual situation--"Myself am Hell"--and this
realization is far from comic. As Thomas Wheeler says:

> Satan knows he is wrong--not that he has made a mistake,
> not that he has suffered a temporary setback--he knows that
> he is wrong. His pride is wrong, his defiance is wrong, his
> ambition is wrong: everything that defines him is wrong.[60]

Though their explanations fall somewhat short, Lewis and Seaman are on
the right track. Satan is comic, but his comedy is of the obsessive type
with which we are now familiar. Like a compulsive gambler who, even
though he continually loses, continues to throw his money away, Satan
persists in challenging God. Satan has lost one war as the poem opens,

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[58]Lewis, p. 98.

[59]John E. Seaman, *The Moral Paradox of Paradise Lost* (The Hague:
Mouton, 1971), pp. 72-73.

[60]Thomas Wheeler, *Paradise Lost and the Modern Reader* (Athens, Ga.:
Univ. of Georgia Press, 1974), p. 102.

and he immediately plans a second, more covert, attack in an attempt to "spite" the Almighty. The result: With "a dismal universal hiss" (*PL*. X.508), Satan and his followers are reduced to horrid serpents. Satan is comic because he refuses to learn from experience. We can easily imagine a sequel to *Paradise Lost* in which Satan, "A monst'rous serpent on his belly prone" (*PL*. X.514), addresses a throng of lesser serpents and urges them, as they chew their ashes, to seek even new ways to harrass their creator. Indeed, Satan has been ludicrous from the beginning of the poem; was not his opening, heroic address delivered from a prone position?

In Book III, God says that if man's will were not left free, there would be no pleasure, but merely compulsion, in his obedience (*PL*. III.100-10). By extension we can see that obedience would be likewise meaningless if the alternative to God were not in some ways attractive. Satan is outwardly attractive; if he is more attractive than God, then we who have studied the Vice of medieval drama should not be surprised. Nor should we conclude that Milton was on the Devil's side or that he lost control of his art. He was in fact being traditional--in the sense that the Vices were traditional--in his presentation of evil. Satan appeals to our senses, our emotions; evil has always done so. God appeals to our rational faculties; salvation has always implied rational control of our senses. If, like Blake, we are seduced by Satan's sensual power, we are not confirming Milton's Satanism. Rather, we are acknowledging the rightness of his portrayal. Eve fell prey to Satan, so did Blake, so can we. But Milton did not want us to do so, and this is the point of the poem.

Of course we feel ambivalence toward Satan; this is the source of his grotesquerie. We simultaneously fear his evil nature, admire his perseverance, and laugh at his absurdity. We also feel ambivalence toward the Vice and toward such characters as Benjy Compson, but we would neither intentionally seek damnation nor would we praise idiocy. In his creation of Satan, then, Milton uses the grotesque in a traditional way, as we can see by contrasting Satan with the untraditional Falstaff. Even though there are obvious similarities in the appeal of Satan and Falstaff, we can sense a fundamental difference in their characterization. Shakespeare takes an ostensibly evil character and deliberately makes us admire him, thus leaving his thematic function in doubt. Milton reverses this formula by taking an ostensibly heroic character and showing the inner degradation which is his essence. If there is functional ambiguity at the beginning of the poem, there is none at the end. Satan is pure evil; his hatred is placed in direct contrast to the love displayed by Christ. His thematic function is never seriously in doubt to those who take the poem as a whole.

The ambiguity which is treated by inference in the epic style of *Paradise Lost* becomes the essential ingredient of the satire of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. As Louis Landa perceptively but somewhat awkwardly says, to the eighteenth century "satire was an affirmative thing, with constructive intentions. It seemed to offer the best corrective to the vices and follies of man and society as no other literary mode could."[61]

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[61]Louis A. Landa, "Introduction," in *Jonathan Swift: Gulliver's Travels and Other Writings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. viii.

Some readers, however, see Swift's imaginary voyage as anything but constructive, for his satire, especially in Book IV, seems particularly destructive. This seeming misanthropy has caused many to turn away, to say, as Herbert Davis points out, "Do not listen to this fellow, because he is mad; or, He is a monster, uttering blasphemies against mankind; or, He is abnormal, incapable of ordinary affection and loyalties; do not trust anything he says."[62] These sentiments betray an ignorance of Swift's basic technique of physical and psychological distortion. Although he tempers the horror of his distortions with a grim sort of humor--as do other masters of the grotesque--Swift offers no sustained relief from this abnormal world by positing attractive alternatives to it. In fact, he seems, by what Maynard Mack calls a "blending of light and shadow,"[63] deliberately to shift moral perspectives deliberately to confuse us about where to stand in relation to the issues of the work--the wisdom of right reason versus the folly or vice of reason corrupted. Of course, Swift advocates right reason, but we are never really sure when, or indeed whether, we have located it. For Swift does not deal in straightforward terms of virtue and vice; he does not embody all of the good in one character, all of the bad in another. His satire, like a shotgun blast, scatters to wound all who come within its range. He gives the reader the security of identifying with a desirable character only to take the

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[62]Herbert Davis, *Jonathan Swift: Essays on His Satire and Other Studies* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), p. 151.

[63]Maynard Mack, "Gulliver's Travels," in *Swift: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ernest Tuveson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 113.

security away, and if destruction results, this does not mean that Swift
is absolutely misanthropic. Indeed, our analogy of the wound is somewhat
misleading, for Swift is positive in his approach--like a physician, he
must sometimes lacerate in order to cure. If anything is destroyed in
the process, it is only the rotting flesh of old, outworn ideas. Irvin
Ehrenpreis states it well:

> The problem of a moralist like Swift is less to redefine man
> in terms of new ideas than to knock down the fences around
> an accepted definition, compelling men both to measure
> themselves by this [definition] and to re-examine it.[64]

Swift knocks down our fences by his extremely provocative use of
the grotesque. Each of the four books of *Gulliver's Travels* contains
characters that are humorously distorted--sometimes physically, sometimes
psychologically, sometimes both. Swift does not, however, permit us to
adopt a consistent attitude toward these distorted characters, for their
positive and negative characteristics are hopelessly intertwined. Over
and over, we are drawn into assuming a particular moral stance by
identifying with one or the other of the characters, only to be shown the
absurdity of this position. The cumulative effect of these continued
assaults is one of profound disorientation which can be corrected only by
re-evaluation and, hopefully, modification of our normal rational
processes.

Book I is fairly straightforward. Gulliver--"the seaman, the plain
honest traveller, not over learned or too literary . . . a simple plain

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[64]Irvin Ehrenpreis, "The Meaning of Gulliver's Last Voyage," in
Swift: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Ernest Tuveson (Englewood
Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 124.

teachable man of unspoiled intelligence"[65]--finds himself in the land of Lilliput, the distorted inhabitants of which are no more than six inches high. Our sympathies here lie with Gulliver. The quantitative difference between Gulliver and his captors is merely a reflection of qualitative differences, for the Lilliputians are shown to be extremely small-minded. This deficiency is shown in their governmental affairs and in their personal attitudes. Preferment at court is decided not by merit but by rope-dancing;[66] the country is torn apart by a controversy concerning the relative merits of high-heels and low-heels, and the proper end at which to break an egg (*GT*. 39). In their treatment of Gulliver, the Lilliputians are also shown to be deficient. Their monarch, in his insatiable desire for power, wishes Gulliver to steal the entire naval fleet of the rival kingdom of Blefescu, and later to reduce "the whole empire of Blefescu into a province" (*GT*. 42). Gulliver agrees with the former request, for which he is given the title *Nardac*, but he refuses the latter--"I would never be an instrument of bringing a free and brave people into slavery" (*GT*. 42)--and for this he receives only resentment. The antipathy is increased by Gulliver's "most signal service" (*GT*. 44) of urinating on a fire which threatens to destroy the queen's apartment. The tiny Lilliputians are tainted by self-pride and self-interest; affronted by Gulliver's intransigence and seeming insolence, they declare him a criminal and seek his blindness and slow death by starvation. Opposed to this pettiness is the broadmindedness of Gulliver, who, in the face of

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[65]Davis, p. 145.

[66]Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, in Landa, op. cit., p. 31. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *GT* and page number.

death refuses to seek revenge:

> I soon rejected that project with horror, by
> remembering the oath I had made to the Emperor,
> the favours I received from him, and the high title
> of *Nardac* he conferred upon me. Neither had I
> so soon learned the gratitude of courtiers, to
> persuade myself that his Majesty's present
> severities acquitted me of all past obligations.
> (*GT*. 58)

Nor does he accede to a request made from the Blefescudian monarch to aid in an attack on those who had wronged him.

The Lilliputians are not all bad, however, for in their institutions, Gulliver finds much that is admirable: Unjust accusers are punished severely; citizens are rewarded for upholding the law, not just punished for breaking it; ingratitude is considered a capital crime; children are educated in the proper principles by the state; women are afforded educational opportunities equal to those of the men. Although Gulliver is careful to point out that he is speaking of "the original institutions, and not the most scandalous corruptions into which these people are fallen" (*GT*. 48), there is a tone of gentle admiration in his praise which undercuts a totally negative response to the Lilliputians. In this book, Gulliver is basically good, the little people, basically bad; but the ambiguity suggested by the utopian elements of their society is only the beginning of a much more profound ambiguity which builds as the work progresses.

In Book II, when Gulliver finds himself in the land of Brobdingnag, the physical relationships are reversed and the security we experienced in identifying with Gulliver receives its first real shock. Here Gulliver is the pygmy, while the real inhabitants stand over sixty feet tall. The

correlation between physical size and breadth of understanding remains basically unchanged, however, for Gulliver is here shown to be the one with the small mind. In conversations with the king of Brobdingnag, Gulliver relates with pride the recent history of Europe only to be told truthfully that it is

> only an heap of conspiracies, rebellions, murders, massacres, revolutions, banishments, the very worst effects that avarice, faction, hypocrisy, perfidiousness, cruelty, rage, madness, hatred, envy, lust, malice, and ambition could produce. (*GT*. 106)

Undaunted, Gulliver offers to show the king how to make gunpowder, which would "not only destroy whole ranks of an army, but batter the strongest walls to the ground, [and] sink down ships" (*GT*. 109). Our security is dealt another serious blow as the Brobdingnagian monarch gives his conclusions about Gulliver and his countrymen: "I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth" (*GT*. 107). Opposed to the narrowness of European government as related by Gulliver, the king proposes a peaceful, just sovereignty and a productive, benevolent social philosophy. If the satire stopped here, we would perhaps begin to share the king's sentiment when he observed "how contemptible a thing was human grandeur, which could be mimicked by such diminutive insects" (*GT*. 86) as Gulliver.

But such a reaction is too simple for Swift to allow. By endowing the rational, benevolent Brobdingnagians with some decidedly negative characteristics, Swift short-circuits a straightforward positive response to the giants. Gulliver discovers that underneath the utopian shell of the Brobdingnagian government lies corruption equal to that of Europe:

> In the course of many ages they have been troubled with
> the same diseases to which the whole race of mankind is
> subject; the nobility often contending for power, the people
> for liberty, the King for absolute dominion. (*GT*. 112)

They are greedy, as is shown by Glumdalclitch's father's treatment of

Gulliver. Swift also robs the giants of our sympathy by his detailed

descriptions of their physical repulsiveness. The descriptions of the

nurse's gigantic breast and the overpowering smell of the royal maids

of honor are among the most revolting in literature, as is that of the

beggars who sit in the midst of this pseudo-utopia:

> There was a woman with a cancer in her breast, swelled
> to a monstrous size, full of holes, in two or three of
> which I could have easily crept, and covered my whole body.
> There was a fellow with a wen in his neck, larger than five
> woolpacks, and another with a couple of wooden legs, each
> about twenty foot high. (*GT*. 90)

There is much to admire in the principles expounded by the

magnanimous king of Brobdingnag, as there is much to condemn in the

narrowness of the European mind as expressed by Gulliver, but the physical

repulsiveness of the giants and the inconsistency with which their

principles are applied prevent us from reacting in a purely positive way,

and with Gulliver at the end of Book II, we are glad to be back at home.

If Gulliver is given basically negative treatment in Book II, he

is back on top in Book III, as he ventures into the land of the Laputans,

who, though of regular size, are severely distorted. They are "singular

in their shapes, habits, and countenances": "Their heads were all reclined

either to the right, or the left; one of their eyes turned inward, and

the other directly up to the zenith" (*GT*. 127). Their distortion is

psychological and intellectual as well as physical, however. They are so

wrapped up in abstract speculation that they cannot attend to the necessary

activities of everyday life. Indeed, each must be accompanied by a "flapper" who carries a gravel-filled bladder with which to tap his master on the head and pull him back from his world of abstractions. It is mainly in the nature of their speculations that we see their true deformity, for they attempt such absurdities as extracting sunbeams from cucumbers, building houses from the roof down, raising a herd of naked sheep, sowing a field with chaff, and turning human excrement into food.

Along with Gulliver, we laugh at these absurdities, but again our reaction is complicated by the accomplishments of these creatures. They make considerable strides in the fields of music and mathematics, their chief sciences, but they are also adept at astronomy. They have perfected the telescope, discovered three times as many stars as their European counterparts, and found two new stars revolving around Mars. Their political projectors, despite much absurdity, have also made progress in their plans for increasing the "wisdom, capacity and virtue" (*GT*. 152) of the government. Nor are the Laputans deluded, as is Gulliver, into longing for eternal life, for they have before them the examples of the Struldbruggs, who have perpetual life without "a perpetuity of youth, health, and vigour" (*GT*. 170), and who thus become "opinionative, peevish, covetous, morose, vain, talkative . . . uncapable of friendship, and dead to all natural affection" (*GT*. 171).

Gulliver is in many ways superior to his hosts in these lands, but they are not given totally negative treatment. They cannot serve as a definite contrast, a "bad" as opposed to Gulliver's "good." The confusion is therefore continued into the final, most provocative and controversial of the books.

In Book IV, Gulliver finds himself in a land inhabited by rational horses known as Houyhnhnms and monkey-like human creatures known as Yahoos. With the skill of a surgeon, Swift splits humanity down the middle, giving pure sensuality to the Yahoos and pure rationality to the Houyhnhnms, and places Gulliver in the middle of a pseudo-psychomachia to see which side he will choose.

The divisions are more sharply drawn here than in previous books. The Yahoos are seemingly all bad, while the horses are seemingly all good, *"the perfection of nature"* (*GT*. 190). The Yahoos are repulsive in both appearance and actions. Although human in shape, the "ugly monsters" (*GT*. 181) are covered with frizzy hair, except about the anus, and the women have dugs that hang almost to the ground. The creatures are greedy in their hoarding of colorful stones; they have "an undistinguishing appetite to devour every thing that came in their way" (*GT*. 211); they become wildly intoxicated on the juice of a particular root; they are beset with countless diseases as a result of their extreme filth; and they are driven by lust as Gulliver discovers when an eleven-year-old female Yahoo attacks him while he bathes. The Houyhnhnms stand in striking contrast. They make good use of their equine bodies: They sit upright, make cloth, thread needles, and accomplish to perfection all other domestic tasks. But their rational qualities far outshine their physical ones. As Gulliver says:

> These noble Houyhnhnms are endowed by nature with a general
> disposition to all virtues, and have no conceptions or ideas
> of what is evil in a rational creature, so their grand maxim
> is, to cultivate reason, and to be wholly governed by it.
> (*GT*. 215-16)

Their two principle virtues are "benevolence and friendship" (*GT*. 216);
they teach their children "temperance, industry, exercise and cleanliness"
(*GT*. 217); they provide equal educational opportunities for male and
female; they care for those in need; and they do not fear death. Gulliver
even finds it necessary to explain to these perfect creatures the meaning
of "evil," for which they have neither word nor concept.

Book IV is a book of climaxes. The physical disgust of the human
body which we glimpsed in Brobdingnag, the pettiness and irrationality
of Lilliput, and the perverted reason of Laputa are summed up in the
contemptible Yahoos; while the joys of right reason glimpsed in the
utopian sections of the other three books here find completion in the
supremely rational Houyhnhnms. The real climax comes, however, when the
Houyhnhnm master declares Gulliver Yahoo, for we who have identified with
Gulliver now see our true nature. Repulsed, Gulliver decides to become
like the Houyhnhnms:

> When I thought of my family, my friends, my countrymen, or
> human race in general, I considered them as they really were,
> yahoos in shape and disposition, only a little more civilized,
> and qualified with the gift of speech, but making no other use
> of reason than to improve and multiply those vices whereof
> their brethren in this country [the yahoos] had only the share
> that nature had allotted them. (*GT*. 224-25)

With such thoughts as these, Gulliver turns in disgust from his own
image, begins to imitate the horses in "gait and gesture" (*GT*. 225), and
becomes "apt to fall into the voice and manner of the Houyhnhnms" (*GT*.
225). So enamoured of these creatures is he that when they decide no
longer to harbor a Yahoo, no matter how intelligent, Gulliver chooses a
life of isolation on a desert island where, as he says, "I could at least
enjoy my own thoughts, and reflect with delight on the virtues of those

inimitable Houyhnhnms, without opportunity of degenerating into the vices and corruptions of my own species" (*GT*. 208). Even after he is rescued by Pedro de Mendez and finds himself at home in London, the sight of his family fills him with such "hatred, disgust and contempt" (*GT*. 233) that he buys two horses with which he converses "at least four hours every day" (*GT*. 234).

Considering the unbridled enthusiasm with which Gulliver praises the Houyhnhnms, we could feel that Gulliver has made the right decision, that he has rejected the vice represented by the Yahoos and embraced the total goodness of the Houyhnhnms. Such is the conclusion of Irvin Ehrenpreis: "If, says Swift, we were more like the Houyhnhnms in character, we should be better off than we are now: that is his premise."[67] The only problem with Ehrenpreis's explanation is, as Horrell points out, that

> anyone who seriously believes that Swift, as distinguished
> from Gulliver, wishes to offer the Houyhnhnms as *animal*
> *rationale*, or an ideal for man, must somehow take seriously
> Swift's picture of Gulliver, at home, gravely conversing
> with the horses.[68]

This situation is indeed hard to take seriously, for in the last three chapters of Book IV, Swift shows, through the characters of Pedro de Mendez and Gulliver's wife, that man does not equal Yahoo and that Gulliver's resolution, if it is a resolution, is a false one. Can we believe that Swift would be in favor of a cloistered virtue, one which

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[67]Ehrenpreis, p. 141.

[68]Joseph Horrell, "What Gulliver Knew," in *Swift: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ernest Tuveson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 63.

could only be maintained in the solitude of a desert island or in a stable with two stone-horses? Can he, indeed, put forth as ideal a society so naive that it does not even know that there is evil in the world? Such questions have caused Ricardo Quintana to speculate that "there are moments when we have to ask ourselves whether our imaginary voyage is not becoming a parody of itself--whether, for instance, the Utopian elements are not slyly humorous."[69] John Ross goes further to suggest that Gulliver himself becomes an object of satire:

> On voyage four . . . in the simple intellectual and moral environment of the Houyhnhnms, and horrified at the Yahoos, Gulliver has found that final intellectual development and illumination which leads to a completely closed mind.[70]

We leave Gulliver at the end of Book IV, as we left Billy Pilgrim at the end of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, with a false resolution, contemplating only virtue and good moments as the rotten world continues to turn on its rotten axis.

What, then, is the point of Swift's satire? We said that his approach was a positive one, but now see that he negates everything without proposing positive alternatives. The answer is, as John Ross points out, that "Swift offers no answer of his own, no solution."[71] Herbert Davis explains it thus:

> [Swift] did not wish to prescribe for the sickness of humanity, having no hope of its recovery; but he could not refrain from

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[69] Ricardo Quintana, *Swift: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955), p. 159.

[70] John F. Ross, "The Final Comedy of Lemuel Gulliver," in *Swift: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ernest Tuveson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 80.

[71] Ross, p. 89.

probing, anatomizing and diagnosing its malady, though
convinced that the further he went the more he would find
to stir his indignation and his pity.[72]

But Donoghue is more positive when he says that Swift wanted to "bring

things to the light of day so that we may at least see what they are

doing."[73]

Swift's positive contribution is to heighten our awareness of the

problems facing us, rather than to dictate their solutions. He is a

challenging writer full of surprises. He distorts human characteristics

but constantly shifts his attitude toward these distortions in order to

provoke the reader into a re-examination of his rational processes. What

Swift gives with one hand, he takes away with the other, and if the right

hand offends thee, so probably will the left. Swift did not write merely

to please; he wanted to vex us into seeing the world for what it is. Only

then can we begin to cure the wounds which infect it. In this attitude

we discern Swift's kinship to modern writers such as Shaffer and Beckett

who use the grotesque in a similarly complex way.

The major tendencies of the grotesque that we have studied thus

far are combined in a Romantic novel which is perhaps as grotesque as

anything ever written--Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or The Modern

Prometheus*. The novel is at once frightening and humorous. Its

grotesquerie is both physical--like that of the monsters--and psychological-

like that of the humour characters. And the thematic function of the

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[72]Davis, p. 157.

[73]Denis Donoghue, *Jonathan Swift: A Critical Introduction*
(Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), p. 179.

grotesque elements is both traditional as it serves to negate the good, and non-traditional as it is used to show the deficiencies of the fair-seeming normal world. To see these conflicting tendencies at work, we must look separately at the plights of the two major characters--Frankenstein and his unnamed monster--as they struggle to understand the world and their places in it.

Frankenstein concerns a brilliant, amiable young scientist who discovers the secret of life but in the process destroys all that is dear to him. More than a horror story, the novel shows through Frankenstein the destructive effects of obsession, and through the Monster the tragedy of a life of physical and spiritual isolation.

Victor Frankenstein, like the Vices and the humour characters, is a man obsessed--he is a psychological grotesque with a traditional thematic function. From the time he loses the innocent joys of childhood until his death in the frozen wastes of the arctic circle, Frankenstein is not a free man, for he allows a series of obsessions to rule his existence. As a young man, Victor's future looks promising. He is very intelligent, curious, and well adjusted. He has a happy home life with his father Alphonse, brother William, fiancee Elizabeth, and friend Justine Moritz. But his closest friend and confidant is Henry Clerval, of whom Victor says, "We were never completely happy when Clerval was absent."[74] "No youth could have passed more happily than mine" (*F*. 21), Victor says, but his youth does pass, and when he goes to the University of Ingolstadt, he

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[74]Mary W. Shelley, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (New York: Books, Inc., n.d.), p. 21. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *F* and page number.

falls prey to an excessive ambition which manifests itself in a mono-maniacal pursuit of the knowledge of Natural Philosophy. "Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed?" (*F.* 34). Victor answers this question and with his newly found knowledge is able to "give life to an animal as complex and as wonderful as man" (*F.* 36). This noble pursuit--which would break through the boundaries of life and death, "pour a torrent of light into our dark world," and "renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption" (*F.* 37)--is, however, the result of not-so-noble desires. Victor shows his egotistical motives as he says:

> A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many
> happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me.
> No father could claim the gratitude of his child so
> completely as I should deserve theirs. (*F.* 37)

The results of these desires reflect the baseness of the motives behind them. As he works in "the unhallowed damps of the grave" (*F.* 37) and "the dissecting-room and slaughter-house" (*F.* 38), Victor's cheek grows "pale with study," his person, "emaciated with confinement" (*F.* 37). He commits the cardinal sins of romanticism by allowing himself to be cut off from the enjoyment of nature and of his fellow-man: "My eyes were insensible to the charms of nature. And the same feelings which made me neglect the scenes around me caused me to forget my friends" (*F.* 38). He studies because of a "resistless and almost frantic impulse" (*F.* 37) which has "an irresistable hold" (*F.* 38) on his imagination. Nor is his creation a "happy and excellent being" but rather an unimaginably ugly creature which even Victor cannot bear to look upon: "I had gazed on him while unfinished: he was ugly then: but when those muscles and joints

were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived" (*F*. 41). Filled with "breathless horror and disgust" (*F*. 40), Victor attempts to desert his creature, but his attempt is doomed to failure. Even Victor realizes that the monster is more than just a living creature; he is a symbol of obsession. Victor calls him "my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me" (*F*. 61).

The golden dream turns nightmare, and the obsession which figuratively cuts Victor off from his friends and family takes concrete form to accomplish his total isolation. As the monster turns destructive, Victor's obsession with knowledge is replaced by an overwhelming sense of guilt. When the monster kills William and cleverly places the blame on Justine, who is hence convicted and executed, Victor realizes the extent of his crime but is unable to overcome his isolation and to share his guilt and his sorrow, even with Clerval: "I loved him with a mixture of affection and reverence that knew no bounds, yet I could not persuade myself to confide to him that event which was so often present to my recollection" (*F*. 51-52). In deepest despair, Victor echoes Milton's Satan as he says, "I bore a hell within me, which nothing could extinguish" (*F*. 72). Angry at Victor's refusal to create a mate for him, the monster kills Clerval, Elizabeth, and indirectly, Alphonse. It is only after he has lost all that is dear to him that Victor overcomes his isolation and divulges his hideous secret to a magistrate. But even then he cannot escape obsession, for he replaces his oppressive guilt with a monomaniacal thirst for revenge--"the devouring and only passion of my soul" (*F*. 91), as he calls it--and begins a desperate pursuit which ends, fittingly, in

the barren wastes of the icy arctic circle, a setting which Robert Kiely calls "a cold blank, an image of sterility and failure."[75]

"I trod heaven in my thoughts," Victor says at his death, "now exulting in my powers, now burning with the idea of their effects" (*F.* 204). But his god-like desires are mocked by the reality of his undertaking: "I collected bones from charnel-houses, and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame" (*F.* 38). Harold Bloom sees "an indeliberate humor"[76] in the discrepancy between the desire and the actuality, and Robert Kiely notes that "the sheer concreteness of the ugly thing which Frankenstein has created often makes his ambitions and his character--however sympathetically described--seem ridiculous and insane."[77] Whether we share these views of Victor's essential humor, we can see that claims of his heroic romanticism, like those suggested by Walling--who sees "an unrepentant flame of hope"[78] in Victor's dying cry, "I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed"--are exaggerated. His heroism dies along with all the members of the family. Victor realizes his error, as he tells us several times. "A human being in perfection," he says, "ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory

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[75] Robert Kiely, *The Romantic Novel in England* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972), p. 169.

[76] Harold Bloom, *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 124.

[77] Kiely, p. 161.

[78] William A. Walling, *Mary Shelley* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972), p. 41.

desire to disturb his tranquillity" (*F*. 39). And in his most passionate

lament, Victor sums up his nightmarish existence:

> During my youthful days, discontent never visited my mind;
> and if I was ever overcome by *ennui*, the sight of what is
> beautiful in nature, or the study of what is excellent and
> sublime in the productions of man, could always interest my
> heart, and communicate elasticity to my spirits. But I am a
> blasted tree; the bolt has entered my soul: and I felt then
> that I should cease to exhibit, what I shall soon cease to be--
> a miserable spectacle of wrecked humanity, pitiable to others,
> and abhorrent to myself. (*F*. 148)

These are the consequences of Victor's allowing an obsession,

whether knowledge or guilt or revenge, to isolate him from the joys of

nature and his fellow man. M. A. Goldberg is right in calling Victor's

tale an "exemplum"[79] warning against excesses of any kind. Victor

Frankenstein is grotesque, and his grotesquerie serves to define an

aberrant approach to life, the alternative to which is provided in the

open affection of Frankenstein's family and his closest friend. "Learn

from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example" (*F*. 36), Victor

cries as he takes his place in the grotesque tradition stretching from

the morality drama to the fiction of modern writers such as William

Faulkner.

If we look to the nature of the monster we can see the grotesque

functioning in a very different way. Hideously deformed by his gigantic

patchwork body and his "watery eyes, that seemed almost the same color as

the dun white sockets in which they were set" (*F*. 40), the monster looks

out upon an incomprehensible world: "Everywhere I see bliss," he cries,

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[79] M. A. Goldberg, "Moral and Myth in Mrs. Shelley's *Frankenstein*," *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 8 (1959), 29.

"from which I alone am irrevocably excluded" (*F.* 84). Like Victor, the monster becomes obsessed with "an insatiable thirst for revenge" (*F.* 213), but the causes of his obsession make him, though despicable, a sympathetic and attractive character. He is, as Milton Mays says, "the victim of universal injustice--from man, and from his 'God,' Frankenstein, a god who, after casting him botched into a world in which he inspires horror, abandons him."[80]

The monster is a complex character; in many ways he is humorous, although probably unintentionally. In an early review published in *Blackwood's Magazine*, Walter Scott notes the humorous "improbability"[81] which surrounds the monster's education and his undetected violence. After escaping from Victor's laboratory, the monster finds refuge in the back room of a hut inhabited by an exiled French family and remains there undetected for several months. As he observes the family through a chink in the wall, the monster learns how to speak, read, and even write. He coincidentally finds in the forest copies of *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch's *Lives*, and *The Sorrows of Werther*, from the combination of which he develops an extraordinarily sophisticated (especially for a monster) ethical philosophy:

> I felt the greatest ardor for virtue rise within me, and
> abhorrence for vice, as far as I understood the significance
> of those terms, relative as they were, as I applied them,
> to pleasure and pain alone. (*F.* 116)

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[80]Milton A. Mays, "*Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley's Black Theodicy," *Southern Humanities Review*, 3 (1969), 147.

[81]Quoted in Walling, p. 34.

Kiely says rightly that there is "something ludicrous in the way the monster stumbles upon books and learns to read during his lonely wandering."[82] The absurdity is heightened by the pretentiousness and eloquence which the monster displays as he indulges in literary allusion and literary criticism. It is hard to suppress a smile as the monster describes his hut--"as exquisite and divine a retreat as Pandemonium appeared to the demons of hell after their sufferings in the lake of fire" (*F.* 90)--or expresses a critical opinion of *Werther*--"a simple and affecting story . . . with gentle and domestic manners" (*F.* 114-15). Improbabilities such as these are probably what prompted another early reviewer in *Blackwood's Magazine* to call *Frankenstein* a creation "in the highest style of caricature and exaggeration,"[83] or one in the *Quarterly* to describe the reader's reaction as a "struggle between laughter and loathing."[84]

As this last statement suggests, our laughter is short-circuited by the overwhelmingly evil deeds committed by the monster. He kills young William Frankenstein and, indirectly, Justine Moritz before he even approaches Victor with his plea for a mate. When he does encounter Victor, he reinforces his plea with a blood-curdling threat: "If you refuse, I will glut the maw of death, until it be satisfied with the blood of your remaining friends" (*F.* 83). And he makes good the threat, as he

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[82]Kiely, p. 172.

[83]Christopher Small, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: Tracing the Myth* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Univ. Press, 1973), p. 19.

[84]Small, p. 22.

rages at Victor's refusal to grant his request and deliberately kills both Clerval and Elizabeth. "Omnipotent envy and bitter indignation filled me with an insatiable thirst for revenge," he cries, and in an appropriate echo of Milton's Satan, confirms his evil nature: "Evil thenceforth became my good" (*F*. 213).

Our reaction to even this evil cannot, however, be a straight-forwardly negative one, for the monster is evil for a reason. At the beginning of his life, the monster is a sensitive and perceptive creature; he responds to the beauties of nature--"Sometimes I tried to imitate the pleasant songs of the birds" (*F*. 88)--and to the affection shown by the family that inhabits the hut--"I learned, from the views of social life which [they] developed, to admire their virtues, and deprecate the vices of mankind" (*F*. 114). But his gentle feelings find no reinforcement. When he presents himself to the gentle family, "Who can describe their horror and consternation" (*F*. 122) as they strike him with sticks? Later he rescues a drowning girl only to be rewarded with a gunshot wound. Even his initial approach to young William Frankenstein is motivated by a desire for companionship and understanding:

> This little creature was unprejudiced, and had lived too
> short a time to have imbibed a horror of deformity. If,
> therefore, I could seize him, and educate him as my
> companion and friend, I should not be so desolate in this
> peopled earth. (*F*. 129)

Upon being rejected and finding the boy to be a Frankenstein, the monster strangles him and begins his moral descent. But the most painful rejection comes from his creator, and as Victor refuses the monster's eloquent plea for a mate--"O my creator, make me happy . . . . Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing" (*F*. 133)--the monster becomes

confirmed in his destructive desires.

The key to the monster's character is found in his own analogy of his existence to those of Adam and Satan in *Paradise Lost*:

> Like Adam, I was created, apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with, and acquire knowledge from, beings of a superior nature: but I was wretched and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me. (*F*. 116)

Satan is a fit emblem in some ways--both he and the monster are irrevocably rejected by their creators--but the differences in their situations are revealing. The monster himself points up one difference: "Satan had his companions, fellow-devils to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and detested" (*F*. 117). But more significant differences are shown by Milton Mays. He notes that "Satan's misery springs from his crime, the monster's crime from his misery," a misery caused directly by his creator, and that the monster is involuntarily "outcast from life's feast," whereas Satan consciously "rejects repentence out of pride and ambition."[85] Satan, as we have seen, is deliberately evil, whereas the monster's evil results from necessity. The difference is great and, while we cannot admire Satan's childishly vengeful attitude, there is something heroic in the monster's touching reflections upon the disparity between his desires and the actions forced upon him by the world:

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[85]Mays, p. 152.

> When I call over the frightful catalogue of my deeds,
> I cannot believe that I am he whose thoughts were once
> filled with sublime and transcendent visions of the
> beauty and the majesty of goodness. But it is even so;
> the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil. (*F.* 214)

Percy Shelley recognized the monster's appeal as he stated the

moral of his wife's novel:

> Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked. Requite
> affection with scorn; let one being be selected for
> whatever cause as the refuse of his kind--divide him, a
> social being, from society, and you impose upon him the
> irresistable obligations--malevolence and selfishness.[86]

The monster is repulsive both physically and morally, but it is fitting

that Mary Shelley has the magistrate charge Victor with the death of

Clerval, for we cannot condemn the monster without pouring more vehemence

upon his creator and, indeed, upon all those in the world who rely upon

appearances, who refuse to "see into the life of things" and accept

genuine humanity regardless of its outer forms. The monster is a physical

grotesque who shows through his evil the even greater evil of the world

around him and who gains our respect in a way in which the hopelessly

obsessed Victor can never do.

It is fitting that we conclude our study with a famous novel which

uses the grotesque in a strictly traditional way, one which extends

directly back to the morality drama. With *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the

melodramatic story of the adventures of Little Nell, Charles Dickens

captured, and broke, the hearts of the Victorian world by his masterful

use of the grotesque. "In writing the book," he states in the preface, "I

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[86]Walling, p. 49.

had it always in my fancy to surround the lovely figure of the child with grotesque and wild, but not impossible, companions, and to gather about her innocent face and pure intentions, associates . . . strange and uncongenial."[87]   Dickens was thus writing a type of allegory, which Joseph Gold likens to the "morality play structure of emblematic stories and figures,"[88] with clear distinctions between the purity of the innocent child and the wildness of the world she is forced to inhabit. This world is not, however, all bad; there are many characters in it who receive Dickens' sentimental stamp of approval. Besides the ever-cheerful Kit, whose natural and spontaneous laughter continually lightens this predominantly dark novel, there are Dick Swiveller, the Marchioness, Mr. Garland, Mr. Abel, the benevolent schoolmaster, the vagrant steel-worker, and the exuberant Mrs. Jarley to offset the harshness with which Dickens presents the world. But evil is predominant in characters who fit nicely into our by-now familiar categories of physical and psycho-logical grotesquerie. Relatively minor characters like Sampson Bass, the reprehensible lawyer with a "nose like a wen, a protruding forehead, [and] retreating eyes,"[89] and his equally sinister sister Sally, whom Dick Swiveller describes as a "female Dragon" (*OCS*. 254), serve only to point up the greater corruption of the two principal villains, those who will concern us here--Daniel Quilp and Nell's grandfather.

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[87]Quoted in Joseph Gold, *Charles Dickens: Radical Moralist* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1972), p. 94.

[88]Ibid., p. 112.

[89]Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, intro. May Lamberton Becker (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1946), p. 84. Hereafter cited parenthetically by *OCS* and page number.

Quilp is truly a spectacular villain. May Lamberton Becker calls him a "gargoyle"[90] because of his hideous appearance, but we can see that her analogy is fitting in other significant ways. Quilp is indeed frighteningly ugly, and Dickens delights in describing him. He is a dwarf with a head and face "large enough for a giant" and "a few dis-coloured fangs" which give him "the aspect of a panting dog" (*OCS*. 20). His smile is "ghastly" (*OCS*. 20) and "doglike" (*OCS*. 35); it seems to be "compounded of every monstrous grimace of which men and monkeys are capable" (*OCS*. 360). He grins "like a devil" (*OCS*. 24-25), lives in a "lair" (*OCS*. 511), and gives the dominant impression of "a dismounted nightmare" (*OCS*. 370). His animal-like appearance is reinforced by his equally nonhuman actions, a good example of which can be seen as he startles his timid wife and meddling mother-in-law:

> . . . he ate hard eggs, shell and all, devoured gigantic
> prawns with the heads and tails on, chewed tobacco and water-
> cresses at the same time and with extraordinary greediness,
> drank boiling tea without winking, bit his fork and spoon till
> they bent again, and in short performed so many horrifying and
> uncommon acts that the women were nearly frightened out of
> their wits, and began to doubt if he were really a human
> creature. (*OCS*. 38)

As is evident from the exaggeration in the description, there is a great deal of comedy surrounding the character of Quilp. His charac-teristic threat of "I'll bite you" (*OCS*. 35) is, as James Kincaid points out, humorous because of its childishness--it is "a cry from the nursery, the insistence of a child that he be noticed. Quilp is the elemental

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[90]Dickens, p. ii.

naughty boy, protesting with his very life against indifference."[91]
Quilp's actions support Kincaid's claim. Upon being offended by his
wife's tea-party conversation, Quilp sends his mother-in-law to bed and
forces his wife to sit up all night to watch him smoke. He threatens
Tom Scott, his assistant, with boyish glee: "I'll beat you with an iron
rod, I'll scratch you with a rusty nail, I'll pinch your eyes" (*OCS*. 40).
He scatters broken glass and other sharp objects around his hut and keeps
the area purposely dark to delude Sampson Brass. He exults over his
wife's distress as she attempts to bring him a message:

> I'm glad you're wet . . . I'm glad you're cold. I'm glad
> you've lost your way. I'm glad your eyes are red with
> crying. It does my heart good to see your little nose so
> pinched and frosty. (*OCS*. 508)

He delights in shocking the conventional Mrs. Nubbles, who is so repulsed
by Quilp that she fears for her child's safety: "I don't eat babies," he
says, "I don't like 'em" (*OCS*. 160). And, like a child, he is extremely
sensitive to the offhand remarks of others. When Kit remarks that Quilp
is "a uglier dwarf than can be seen anywheres for a penny" (*OCS*. 45),
Quilp begins a plan of revenge which ends with Kit's imprisonment on a
false charge. Quilp replies, "Kit a thief! Ha, ha, ha! Why, he's an
uglier looking thief than can be seen anywhere for a penny" (*OCS*. 449).

It is in the contrast between Quilp and Kit, however, that we
begin to see the dwarf's truly evil nature, for both are the source of
much laughter in the novel. The laughter directed at Quilp is harsh and
tinged with maliciousness and guilt, since his actions result in pain for

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[91]James R. Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 96.

more desirable characters. He is at once a laughable object of our scorn and an object of fear at which we laugh to relieve the tension created by his presence. Opposed to this darkness is the openness and generosity of the laughter which we share with Kit, a laughter untainted by evil and expressive of unrestrained affection and enthusiasm:

> Ha, ha, ha! An't that as natural as walking, and as good
> for the health? Ha, ha, ha! An't that as natural as a
> sheep's bleating, or a pig's grunting, or a horse's
> neighing, or a bird's singing? (*OCS*. 167)

In turning Kit's laughter to tears by his wily stratagems, Quilp adds to the animosity we already feel towards him because of his treatment of Little Nell and her grandfather. For it is Quilp who repossesses their home and forces the child to flee London and lead her "charge" through the hideous world which causes her death. It is Quilp who haunts her dreams and becomes "a perpetual nightmare to the child" (*OCS*. 216). Despite the playful way in which he is sometimes treated, Quilp is evil, as he shows in his most revealing expression: "I hate your virtuous people! . . . Ah! I hate 'em every one" (*OCS*. 362). Dickens gives him a suitable end, as he drowns in the filthy tide surrounding his hut and is buried with a stake through his heart. Quilp is a monster both physically and morally, and like his forebears who lurk in the dark niches of medieval cathedrals, he symbolizes the never-ending assault upon purity and virtue.

While we are dazzled by Quilp's grotesquerie, there is a more subtle, more dangerous villain at work, for it is not the hideous dwarf but the child's grandfather who is the direct cause of the novel's major catastrophe, the death of Little Nell. The grandfather's villainy is

caused by a classic example of obsession, which we have seen working throughout our study of the grotesque: He is psychologically stifled by his intense desire to gamble.

From the first of the novel, we are given clues to the grandfather's deficiencies. Upon entering Little Nell's house, Master Humphrey notices a resemblance between the curiosity shop, which Northrop Frye calls "the threshold symbol of the entrance to the grotesque world,"[92] and the grandfather:

> There were suits of mail standing like ghosts in armor here
> and there, fantastic carvings brought from monkish cloisters,
> rusty weapons of various kinds, distorted figures in china
> and wood and ivory: tapestry and strange furniture that
> might have been designed in dreams. The haggard aspect of
> the little old man was wonderfully suited to the place; he
> might have groped among old churches and tombs and deserted
> houses and gathered all the spoils with his own hands. There
> was nothing in the whole collection but was in keeping with
> himself. (*OCS*. 5)

The old man is thus a sinister creature from the beginning, and despite his continual protestations of love and devotion--"Why, who ever loved a child as I love Nell?" (*OCS*. 6)--his concern is constantly mocked by the reality of the child's existence. We begin to share Master Humphrey's "strong misgiving" and to believe with him that "the grandfather's affection for the child might not be inconsistent with villainy of the worst kind" (*OCS*. 13).

The mystery surrounding the grandfather's midnight walks and his extreme dependence upon the despicable Quilp is cleared as we see the

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[92]Northrop Frye, "Dickens and the Comedy of Humors," in *Experience in the Novel*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1968), p. 72.

changed aspect of the old man at the mention of a card game: "His face was flushed and eager, his eyes were strained, his teeth set, his breath came short and thick" (*OCS*. 220). And the extent of his obsession is reflected in his philosophy of life: "The means of happiness are on the cards and in the dice" (*OCS*. 222). Deprived of this means of happiness by his constant failure to win, the grandfather occasionally wishes he could die, but he is not the worst victim of his compulsive behavior. It is his obsession that robs Little Nell of Kit, the security of her home at the curiosity shop, her hard-earned and well-guarded money, her much-needed job in Mrs. Jarley's wax works, her childhood happiness, her health, and ultimately her life.

While protesting that the grandfather has "not one selfish thought" (*OCS*. 223), Dickens stresses the horror of the situation in a number of places. Perhaps the most horrifying scene in the novel is that in which the grandfather steals the last of the child's money. Even the imagery Dickens uses to describe this incident shows the old man's animal-like characteristics: "A figure was there . . . *it crouched* and *slunk* along, *groping its* way with noiseless hands" (*OCS*. 222; italics mine). Nor is this effect lost upon the child, for, as the narrator tells us:

> No strange robber, no treacherous host conniving at the
> plunder of his guests, or stealing to their beds to kill
> them in their sleep, no nightly prowler no matter how
> terrible and cruel could have awakened in her half the
> dread which the recognition of her silent visitor inspired.
> (*OCS*. 229)

Dickens even allows the grandfather to realize his evil deeds, but in a master-stroke of narrative skill, he makes the realization come too late. After watching the child clean the graves of other children, the old man

"awoke to a sense of what he owed to her," but at that time everyone else in the village, even the children, knows that Nell "will be an angel before the birds sing again" (*OCS*. 413).

Although not so obviously evil as the dwarf, the grandfather is, as one critic points out, "directly responsible for [Nell's] death by removing her from every point of safety and kindness" and is "much closer than Quilp to being the chief villain."[93] Like Quilp, however, he serves a traditional function as he stands in direct opposition to the virtuous Nell. Malevolence destroys, Dickens seems to be saying, but so can misguided love--each is to be avoided. Quilp is deliberately destructive, while the grandfather is a victim of an obsession. But the results are little different. As Joseph Gold says, "the destruction of others may be and frequently is pursued under the name and guise of love."[94]

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[93]Kincaid, p. 80.

[94]Gold, p. 93.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

> Evil as evil cannot be desired: if
> that be desired which is evil, the
> cause is the goodness which is or
> seemeth to be joined with it.
> <div align="right">Richard Hooker
> *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*,
> I.vii.6</div>

With the works of Dickens we have come full circle, as we can see by looking briefly at an essay by Northrop Frye entitled "Dickens and the Comedy of Humors." Declaring the Dickens' characters are neither "realistic portraits" nor "caricatures," Frye says:

> They are humors, like the characters in Ben Jonson . . . .
> the humor is a character identified with a characteristic, like
> the miser, the hypochondriac, the braggart, the parasite, or
> the pedant. He is obsessed by whatever it is that makes him a
> humor, and the sense of our superiority to an obsessed person,
> someone bound to an invariable ritual habit, is, according
> to Bergson, one of the chief sources of laughter.[1]

Frye goes on to show that, because of the inevitable split between good and evil, "the humor comedy has an easy and natural connection with the morality play."[2]

These statements reveal a pattern with which our entire study is concerned. The grotesque embodies the negation of the norm implied by a particular work. This negation is always accompanied by the unresolved

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[1]Northrop Frye, "Dickens and the Comedy of Humors," in *Experience in the Novel*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1968), p. 56.

[2]Ibid., p. 59.

conflict of the humorous and the fearful. In medieval art, the grotesque took the form of hybrid creatures, like the gargoyles of the Gothic cathedrals or the half-human figures in manuscript illumination, which we believe to embody the forces of evil. This conjecture is supported by the "aesthetic" writings of the early Church Fathers, who associated physical ugliness with spiritual deformity, and by comparison of grotesque art with the more conventional formal and popular artistic modes, which were predominantly didactic in intention. Unlike the other kinds of art, however, the grotesque is characterized by tension resulting from the artists' innate inability to view evil in straightforward, negative terms. The disparity between the ideal world envisioned by the Church Fathers and the irrational world of superstition and violence in which the people actually lived tempered the harshness of official Christian doctrine and allowed the artists to express their complex attitude toward evil in the world, while retaining their essentially didactic intentions. The resulting art works are both fearful and humorous in their surprising and original distortions.

In medieval literature the grotesque is more complex, as we can see from the clearest example of medieval literary grotesquerie, the Vice in the morality plays. Since literature can create the effects of spiritual and psychological deformity through dialogue and action, the literary grotesque need not be presented in visually distorted forms, as it was in medieval plastic art; indeed, the Vice is often pleasing in appearance, the better to deceive mankind and lead him to damnation. With names like Lechery and Sloth and Pride, the Vice is an obviously evil figure, but he is also markedly humorous. He attempts to lead mankind away

from virtue, but he does so with a sensual, fun-loving manner which was undoubtedly appealing to the exuberant people of the Middle Ages. Quick-witted, vulgar, and always merry, the Vice is a continual source of laughter in these plays, but this laughter is even more complex: He is not a wooden abstraction, as some modern readers choose to see him, but a realistic figure who is victimized by obsession, as reflected in his allegorical name. The rounded existence which leads to eternal happiness is, in the Vice, perverted by Pride or Sloth or Envy or Wrath. As a realistic figure, he is a social aberration who becomes the object of social ridicule. The laughter directed toward him has, then, elements of the Bergsonian "ragging"[3] which is used as a social weapon against "a certain rigidity of body, mind and character that society would still like to get rid of in order to obtain from its members the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability."[4] Appealingly evil, fearfully humorous, socially limited--the ambiguous Vice grew out of attempts to show the true nature of evil in the world. He was a negation of the spiritual norm; his crippling limitations were a warning against damnation. But he was a protean figure who, because of his multiple appeal, cast long shadows over the English literary tradition.

In these shadows stand many of our modern writers. Although contemporary social, philosophical, and psychological forces have shifted literary emphasis away from concern with traditional conceptions of good and evil, modern themes still reflect concern with successful life

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[3]Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1917), p. 135.

[4]Ibid., p. 21.

adjustment, and they still reveal, in various ways, the pattern established by medieval moralists. William Faulkner is traditional in his creation of characters limited by idiocy or obsession to partial existences. Benjy, Quentin, Jason, Ike, Flem, and the entire Bundren family stand, like the Vice, in contrast to the "virtues" of compassion and competence embodied in Dilsey, Ratliff, and Tull. Flannery O'Connor also creates limited, grotesque characters, but she varies the tradition by endowing the obviously grotesque with relatively admirable qualities. Her Misfit is an insane mass-murderer whose intense religious agony is appealing when compared to the essential shallowness of the ostensibly lovable grandmother. O'Connor takes advantage of the powerful attention-getting qualities of the grotesque and effects a reversal of our expectations to reveal forcefully the nature of our post-lapsarian world. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., develops this technique further by placing his grotesques in a compassionless world in which the human and the mechanical are virtually indistinguishable. Dwayne Hoover, Billy Pilgrim, and Eliot Rosewater are social aberrations. They are insane, but their insanity results from acute sensibility and a heightened consciousness of human needs. In Vonnegut's works, the grotesque--the negation of the societal norm--becomes the only means of retaining humanity in a desensitized world.

In *Equus*, Peter Shaffer creates a character limited by his insanity to a world of television jingles, ludicrous historical fables, and deified horses. Alan Strang is grotesque, but, like The Misfit, he lives with an intensity that shines in comparison to the pallor of life in the normal world. Shaffer pushes the grotesque to new limits as he explores the nature of Alan's insanity. By concentrating on the "extremity" of Alan's

case, Shaffer shows that the workings of the human mind are ultimately unknowable and that we all live in a metaphysical darkness which is given form only by the imposition of arbitrary societal patterns which rob life of its spontaneity and make society, not Alan, the real object of our fear. As an embodiment of disorder, the grotesque becomes, in an irrational world, the desirable human condition. This idea reaches full fruition in Samuel Beckett's fiction. Virtually bodiless, Beckett's characters exist in a world of total disorder. They are not sure who they are, where they are, how they got there, or what they are to do with their lives. Their vulgar humor continually delights us, but their intense questioning strips us of comfortable associations and forces us into an extensive evaluation of the innate disorder of our own lives. Beckett completes the inversion of the grotesque tradition. Originally embodying negative forces, the grotesque has become not only positive, but also one of the major means of making us come to terms with the essential absurdity of the human condition in the fragmented world of the twentieth century.

Discernible in the grotesque literature of the Middle Ages and the modern period is a pattern of limitation, call it vice or insanity, which is analogous to that embodied in Ben Jonson's conception of the humours. From Jonson to Dickens, English writers have created characters whose limitations set them apart from their environment and make them simul- taneously ludicrous and fearful. Attitudes toward the grotesque charac- ters may be essentially negative, as in Jonson, Milton, and Dickens, or they may be highly ambiguous, as in Shakespeare, Swift, and Mary Shelley. Either way, the characters are part of a tradition that looks backward to

the Middle Ages and forward to our modern age.

Certain conceptions are rooted in a particular time and place, but basic patterns remain the same. Man becomes corrupted, or at least narrowed, by allowing himself to lose the mental, psychological, moral, or spiritual balance necessary for a healthy, fulfilling life. Writers are aware of this problem, as they have been from the beginning, and have tried constantly to restore the balance, to show the ways in which an aberration becomes a malady, a malady becomes a fatality. Whether we call this limiting factor a sin, a vice, a humour, an obsession, or a neurosis, the pattern is much the same, and the grotesque is the natural vehicle to express this pattern. But there are writers who approach this fallen world in a different way by endowing their limited, grotesque characters with qualities superior to those of the fair-seeming world around them and thus creating a complex effect that jolts the reader into a new awareness of the essential nature of his world. Both techniques are powerful and effective, and both have endured since the beginning of imaginative creations.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1. Salisbury Cathedral: Virtue and Vice Cycle.

Source: Rosalie B. Green, "Virtues and Vices in the Chapter House in Salisbury," *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institute*, 31 (1968), pl. 49b. Hereafter Salisbury.

Figure 2. Detail of Figure 1.

Source: Salisbury, pl. 51c.

Figure 3. *Life of St. Guthlac*: St. Guthlac Carried Off by Demons.

Source: O. Elfrida Saunders, *English Illumination* (Paris: The Pegasus Press, 1928), 11, pl. 60. Hereafter Saunders.
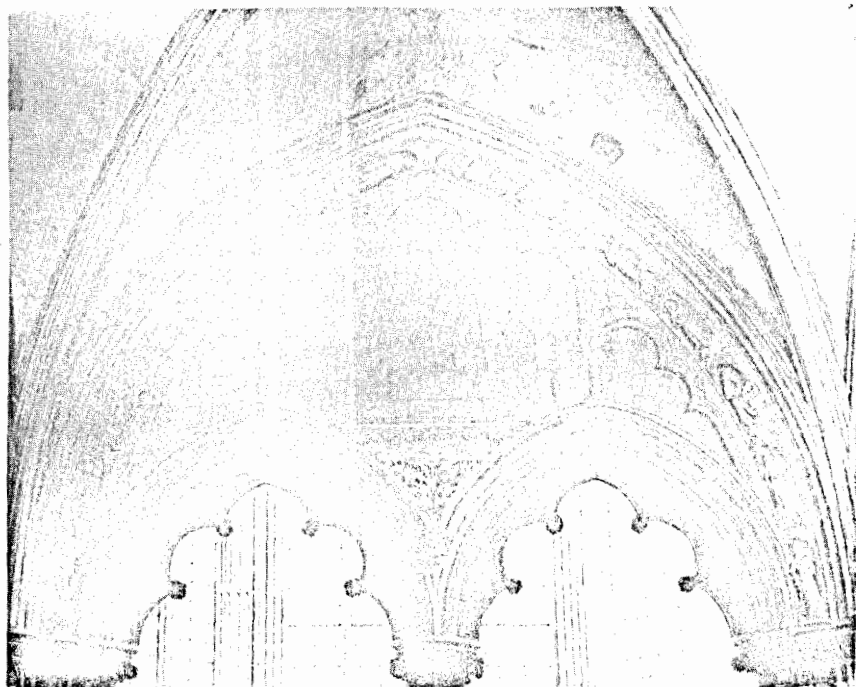
Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Figure 4. *De Quincey Apocalypse*: The Allegory of the Penitent.

Source: Saunders, 11, pl. 73.

Fig. 4

Figure 5. *Psalter of Henry of Blois*: Kiss of Judas.

Source: Saunders, 1, pl. 38.

Fig. 5

Figure 6. *Dance of Death*: The Husbandman.

Source: Thomas Frognall Dibdin, ed., *The Dance of Death and Holbein's Bible Cuts* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896), pl. 38. Hereafter *Death*.

Figure 7. *Dance of Death*: The Soldier.

Source: *Death*, pl. 40.

Figure 8. *Dance of Death*: The Pope.

Source: *Death*, pl. 6.

Figure 9. *Dance of Death*: The King.

Source: *Death*, pl. 8.

Figure 10. Combat of Half-Human Grotesques.

Source: *Queen Mary's Psalter: Miniatures and Drawings by an English Artist of the Fourteenth Century. Reproduced from Royal MS.2B.VII in The British Museum*, ed. Sir George Warner (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1912), pl. 176. Hereafter *Queen Mary's*.
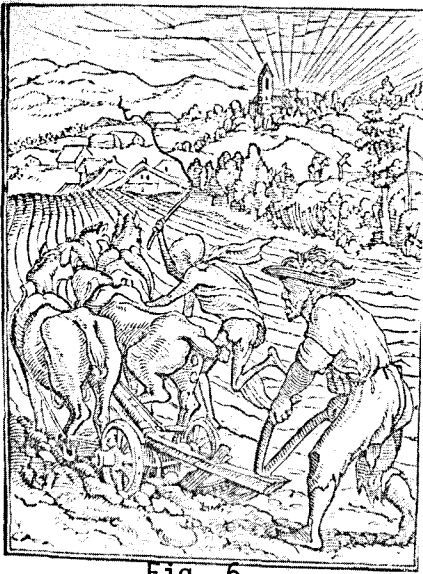
Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Fig. 8

Fig. 9
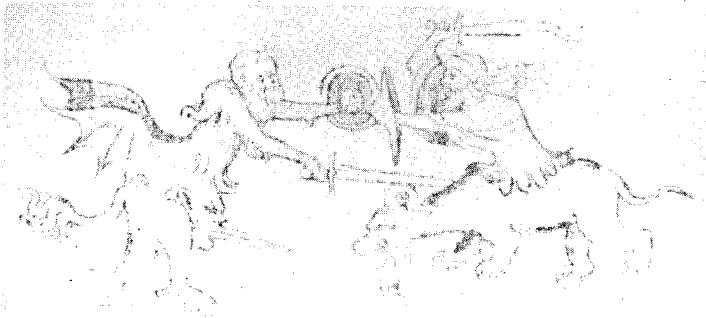
Fig. 10

Figure 11. Sirens.

Source: *Queen Mary's*, pl. 154.

Figure 12. Grotesque with Musical Instrument.

Source: *Queen Mary's*, pl. 213.

Figure 13. Wounded Grotesque.

Source: *Queen Mary's*, pl. 195.

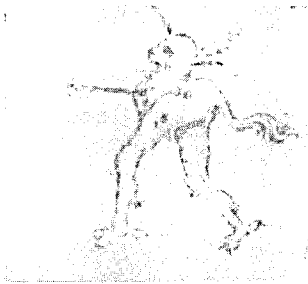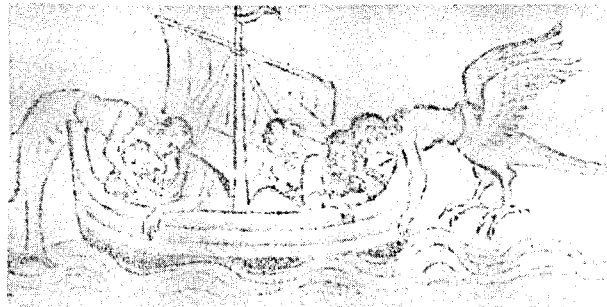Figure 14. Sirens Destroying Mariners.

Source: *Queen Mary's*, pl. 154.

Figure 15. Combat of Half-Human Grotesques.

Source: *Queen Mary's*, pl. 178.

Figure 16. Grotesque with Musical Instrument.

Source: *Queen Mary's*, pl. 213.

Figure 17. Serenading Grotesques.

Source: *Queen Mary's*, pl. 213.

Fig. 11

Fig. 12

Fig. 13

Fig. 14

Fig. 15

Fig. 16

Fig. 17

Figure 18. Newark Cathedral: Gargoyle.

Source: Arthur Gardner, *English Medieval Sculpture*, New Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1956), f. 501.

Figure 19. Marginal Grotesque.

Figure 19a.

Source: *The Luttrell Psalter: Two Plates in Colour and One Hundred and Eighty-Three in Monochrome from the Additional Manuscript 42130 in The British Museum*, ed. Eric George Millar (London: For the Trustees, 1932), f. 61. Hereafter *Luttrell*.

Figure 19b.

Source: *Luttrell*, f. 179b.

Figure 19c.

Source: *Luttrell*, f. 184b.

Figure 19d.

Source: *Luttrell*, f. 60.

Figure 19e.

Source: *Luttrell*, f. 183b.

Figure 19f.

Source: *Luttrell*. f. 61.

Figure 19g.

Source: *Luttrell*, f. 199b.

Figure 19h.

Source: *Luttrell*, f. 167.

Figure 19i.

Source: *Luttrell*, f. 34.

Figure 19j.

Source: *Luttrell*, f. 34.

Figure 20. Durham Cathedral: Sanctuary Knocker.

Source: Edward S. Prior and Arthur Gardner, *An Account of Medieval Figure Sculpture in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1912), p. 169.
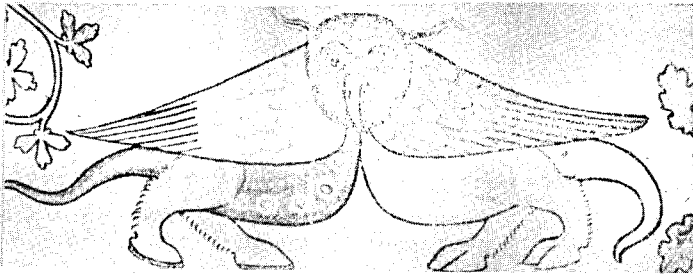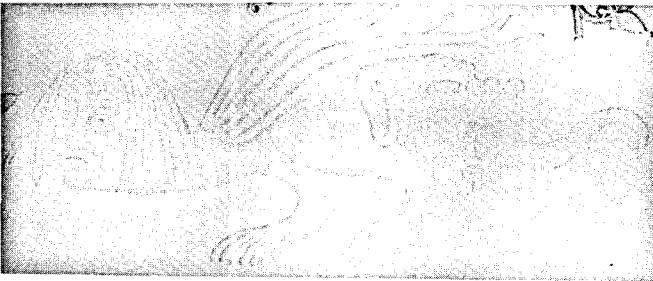
Fig. 18

Fig. 19a

Fig. 19b

Fig. 19c
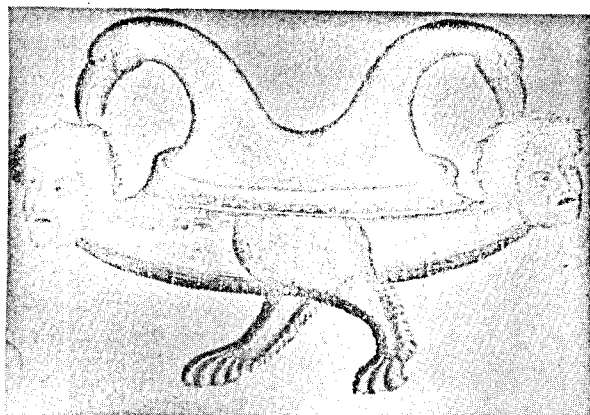
Fig. 19d

Fig. 19d

Fig. 19f

Fig. 19g

Fig. 19h

Fig. 19i

Fig. 20

Fig. 19j

VITA

David Arnold Hambright was born on April 14, 1949, in Charleston, Tennessee. The son of Mr. and Mrs. Fred A. Hambright, he attended Charleston Elementary School and Charleston High School, from which he graduated valedictorian in 1967. He then attended Tennessee Wesleyan College and was awarded the B.S. degree, *summa cum laude*, in 1971. After briefly attending The University of Tennessee Medical School, he enrolled in the graduate school of English at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He received the M.A. degree in 1973 and the Ph.D. degree in 1977. He is currently instructor of English at The University of Tennessee in Knoxville.