Strategies of the Grotesque in Canadian Fiction

LORNA HUTCHISON

Department of English
McGill University, Montreal
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Abstract

In this study of narration, feminist theory, and grotesque Canadian fiction, my aim is to provide a narrative model with which to read characters portrayed as both female and monstrous in a way that criticism on the grotesque does not. I provide two systems for the methodology of this study: *via negativa*, a well-established philosophical system of definition by negation, which shows the strength of the grotesque to represent a subject that is inherently paradoxical; and a narrative model called the "middle voice," which I developed to examine narratives that confuse or render ambiguous the identity of subjects. Through these distinct but complementary frameworks I illustrate a literary phenomenon in fiction of the grotesque: that authors develop and reveal the subjectivity of characters by confounding identities.

Although I provide a concise definition of the term "grotesque," my focus is on feminist theoretical approaches *to* the grotesque. However, whereas feminist theory on the grotesque examines the binary opposition of woman to man, this study shows that the grotesque bypasses the "male/female" dichotomy in the representation of fictional characters. Instead, the sustained contradiction of the central opposition "woman/monster" works to undermine the notion of fictional characterization.

Specifically, this study focuses on the grotesque as a narrative strategy and examines the use of the grotesque in the portrayal of female narrators. The prevalence of female grotesque characters in recent Canadian fiction combined with the rapid growth of interest in the critical concept of the "female grotesque" requires a theoretical analysis of the literature.

In the fiction I examine by Canadian authors Margaret Atwood, Lynn Coady, Barbara Gowdy, Alice Munro, and Miriam Toews, narrators are contradictory. As subjects, they have doubled identities. Authors situate identity ("subjectivity") in the realm of paradox, rather than in the realm of clarity and resolution. As a result, readers and critics must rely on ambiguity and subversion as guides when posing the ultimately irresolvable question "who is speaking?" Through analysis of this fiction, then, I argue for nothing short of a new conceptualization of subjectivity.

Résumé

Dans cette thèse sur la narration, la théorie féministe, et le grotesque dans la fiction Canadienne, mon objectif est de fournir un modèle narratif permettant d'analyser les personnages qui sont représentés simultanément comme femme et monstre. Ma méthode comprend deux systèmes : *via negativa*, un système philosophique de définition par négation qui montre la capacité du grotesque de représenter un sujet paradoxal ; et un modèle appelé « middle voice » que j'ai développé pour analyser des récits dans lesquels l'identité des sujets est ambiguë. En utilisant ces méthodes distinctes mais complémentaires, je révèle qu'avec le grotesque les auteurs développent et exposent la subjectivité des personnages en confondant leur identité.

Je propose une nouvelle définition du terme « grotesque » et j'examine en particulier les approches théoriques féministes du grotesque. Néanmoins, tandis que la théorie féministe sur le grotesque établit une opposition binaire entre la femme et l'homme, cette thèse démontre que le grotesque contourne cette dichotomie dans la représentation des caractères fictifs. L'opposition centrale devient femme/monstre, ce qui change la façon dont les personnages sont représentés dans la fiction.

Cette thèse étudie le grotesque comme stratégie de narration et la manière dont les écrivains s'en servent dans le portrait des femmes narratrices. La forte prévalence de femmes grotesques dans la fiction et le fort intérêt actuel des chercheurs pour le concept de « grotesque féminin » exigent une analyse théorique de cette littérature.

Dans les fictions des auteures Canadiennes Margaret Atwood, Lynn Coady, Barbara Gowdy, Alice Munro, et Miriam Toews que j'examine, les narratrices sont contradictoires : elles manifestent une double identité. Cette double identité se situe dans le paradoxe plutôt que dans la sphère de la clarté et de la résolution. En conséquence, les lectrices et les critiques sont obligés de faire appel aux notions d'ambiguïté et de subversion pour aborder la question : « qui parle ? » Avec l'analyse de cette littérature, je présente une nouvelle conceptualisation de la subjectivité.

Table of Contents

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INTRODUCTION

What is the significance of physically deformed and psychologically aberrant women in contemporary Canadian fiction? With the development over the last three to four decades of grotesque literature in Canada comes the need for criticism of the grotesque to analyse the representation of the female monstrous. My aim in this study of narration, feminist theory, and grotesque Canadian fiction, is to enable literary critics or readers to approach characters portrayed as both human and monster in grotesque literature in a way that existing criticism does not. I identify a contradiction at the level of narration and provide a method for its analysis. Furthermore, I show that the irreducible contradiction of doubled identity is a narrative strategy in literature of the grotesque that reorients and destabilizes the notion of fictional characterization.

I focus on theorists of the grotesque and on the grotesque writing of Canadian authors Lynn Coady, Barbara Gowdy, Alice Munro, and Miriam Toews. Chronologically, the translation of Wolfgang Kayser's watershed The Grotesque in Art and Literature marks the starting point of my study of grotesque theory. Although fiction of the grotesque in Canada begins to emerge in the 1960s, as Margot Northey's The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction demonstrates, the literature I analyse in detail belongs to a period ranging over the last twenty years, wherein the particular phenomenon I identify--in which narrators have doubled identities--becomes apparent. An introduction defines the terms that appear throughout the study: aesthetic, subjectivity, gender, and of course, the grotesque (taken up again in chapter one in more detail). As well, I outline the relationship and difference between the grotesque and

the gothic, and between the grotesque and fantasy, as well as indicate the points of divergence that set the grotesque apart as an aesthetic in and of itself.

I argue that the grotesque is a narrative strategy that *outwits* the boundaries of the classification of gender, and in doing so offers an exciting path for feminist and narrative theory. Hierarchical categories of male/female do not apply in the analysis of women's subjectivity in grotesque fiction. In other words, in narratives of the grotesque, female identity is constituted in relation to the monstrous rather than in relation to the male.

My analysis of literature of the grotesque formulates a narrative strategy that reconstructs, as far as narration, the philosophy of binary opposition. Feminist theory is based on binary opposition. This same foundation underlies the notion of the "female grotesque" as outlined by Mary Russo. Russo is the most popular critic of the female grotesque. Because her pivotal work centers on feminist theory, and as I believe that the grotesque has the potential to further feminism with the bridge that exists between the grotesque, feminist theory, and binary opposition, I provide a survey of feminist theory in chapter one.

As a whole, this study challenges the notion of the "female grotesque," a phrase coined by Russo to emphasize the relation of gender to the grotesque aesthetic. Conventionally, the gender difference of male/female defines the female as both inferior to and an aberration of the male norm; Russo's literary theory contends that since women are defined as the opposite of man, representations of the female must by necessity be grotesque.

Instead, I claim that the grotesque brings readers closer to an understanding of a subject through contradiction; women are paradoxical when they are portrayed as "freaks"[1] or as monstrous--they simultaneously fit and *do not* fit into the category of "women." Author Barbara Gowdy's character Sylvie, for example, from "Sylvie" in *We So Seldom Look on Love*, is born with four legs and a second set of reproductive organs that function independently of Sylvie when her twin sister does not finish developing in their mother's womb. Sylvie is female, but she is also excessively female; her subjectivity is confused for she is both one person and two. It is Sylvie's monstrosity that reveals the schism in her identity. All of her thoughts and actions are marked by this doubleness. The grotesque, therefore, posits Sylvie as a subject by showing that she belongs to two categories simultaneously (woman and monster). The narrative strategy deflects readers from the power struggle between Sylvie and her male relations (which, at first glance, seems to be the narrative focus). It points instead to the fundamental doubleness of Sylvie's own consciousness. In order to approach the "being" of Sylvie, therefore, readers must leave behind rational and familiar categories of thought, including gender norms.

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[1] Freakery belongs to the grotesque as it stands for physical or behavioural abnormalities. Freakery, theorists hold, evokes a dual response of attraction and revulsion in the reader or beholder (Grosz 56, Slay 100). As well, the "freak" combines recognizable and unrecognizable human traits. Russo's reference to conjoined ("Siamese") twins, and hermaphrodites, for example, indicates that "The freak and the grotesque overlap as bodily categories" (79). According to Leslie Fiedler, the freak defies divisions of sex, size, and species, the latter between humans and animals (24). "Freaks are those human beings," Elizabeth Grosz maintains, "who exist outside and in defiance of the structure of binary oppositions that govern our basic concepts and modes of self-definition" (57). Jack Slay Jr. pursues the notion that in the literature he studies, freakery is more about "the sameness between freaks and normals" than about difference (99). About Dunn's *Geek Love* he writes, "all the physical aberrations of the freak are not stigmas; rather freakery is a life that distinguishes and individualizes" (109).

It is necessary to address the issue of gender, if only briefly, since existing literary theory on women and the grotesque centers on a concept of a specifically female aesthetic, the "female grotesque." Moreover, in feminist theory, the question of identity is firmly associated with gender. Judith Butler argues that any analysis of identity must first be grounded upon gender identity: "It would be wrong," she writes, "to think that the discussion of 'identity' ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that 'persons' only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (16). The grotesque literature I analyse, however, does not construct or dissolve subjectivity through the notion of gender and gender relations. Gender is based on difference, upon a binary opposition: "one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair," Butler states (22). For Butler, "Intelligible genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire" (17). Yet, Butler recognizes that "certain kinds of 'gender identities' fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility . . ." (17). The existence of such inconsistencies creates the opportunity to criticize the limits of the term intelligible genders and "to open up . . . subversive matrices of gender disorder" (17). Characters in the fiction I study who do not belong to the "either/or" categories of male and female demonstrate to readers and critics the limitations of the norms Butler outlines and criticizes. My analysis of fictional characters who fall under (I would claim) what Butler terms "logical impossibilities" (17)--the freak being my main example throughout this

study--moves narratives of the grotesque beyond categories of gender, and beyond the gender opposition of male/female in representations of subjectivity.

I provide two systems for the methodology of this study: *via negativa*, a well-established philosophical system of definition by negation, which shows the strength of the grotesque to represent a subject (such as God) that is inherently paradoxical; and a narrative model called the "middle voice," which I developed to examine narratives that confuse or render ambiguous the identity of subjects. Through these distinct but complementary frameworks, I reveal a literary phenomenon in fiction of the grotesque: that authors develop the subjectivity of characters by confounding identities. This paradoxical strategy of defining a self by confounding that self uncovers the paradox of representing women in fiction: ambivalence and confusion are effective means of revealing the irreducible doubleness of a subject. Moreover, I show that when a subject is "two people in one," there is always something hidden behind the representation of that subject. Representations of characters in grotesque narratives, therefore, indicate that the wholeness of a subject's identity is inaccessible and unknowable to readers.

This study asks readers to think about "doubleness," and the structures in our language and thought that uphold dichotomy: namely paradox, ambivalence, and contradiction, but also the sign of the monster or the freak--beings that are considered both normal and not normal in some way, or half familiar and half unrecognizable. The grotesque signifies a combination of opposites: the rational with the irrational, for example, or the familiar with the unfamiliar. "By grotesque," literary critic C. Delogu writes, "I shall mean the abrupt juxtaposition or inventive combination of heterogeneous

categories: animal, vegetable, mineral, material, spiritual, pleasurable, painful . . ." (63). Betty Moss underlines that composite beings--half-human, half-animal--are decidedly "one of the most elemental of grotesque figures" (175), and the means to portraying otherness or difference (176). Similarly, Leonard Cassuto remarks:

> The grotesque may therefore be seen as a breach of fundamental categories surrounding the definition of what is human. Neither one thing nor another, the grotesque is instead a distortion, conflation, or truncation that is simultaneously both and neither--and it thus questions the image of the human. (115)

Duality is the fabric of the grotesque; the response the aesthetic elicits in readers operates through its inherent ambivalence. As Bernard McElroy observes, there is in men and women a "capacity for finding a unique and powerful fascination in the monstrous" (1).

In this way, absurdity or perversity in the novel are not enough independently to conjure the presence of the grotesque; combined in some form with their antithesis, however, the possibilities of the aesthetic begin to materialize. The dynamic between the margins of illuminated mediaeval manuscripts and the sacred writings that figure foremost upon the pages offers an example of what I attempt to express here in relation to the tension created between opposites in the grotesque aesthetic. Absurd images of monsters or monstrous events adorn the margins of mediaeval illuminated manuscripts. But while the drawings of composite creatures are in themselves grotesque, the grotesque aesthetic actually occupies and plays out in a zone that stands between a

centre (the page's written text) and the margin (the area where monstrous drawings appear). It is the interaction, in other words, upheld between centre and margin (between what appears as the sacred and the profane) that embodies the grotesque, rather than the scandalous drawings in and of themselves. Art historian Michael Camille writes: "The centre is . . . dependent upon the margins for its continued existence" (10). In the literature discussed here, the grotesque arises not through specific and sporadic images of excess or absurdity, but through an effect upon readers created through sustained opposition in the portrayal of subjects.

In literary theory, the grotesque signifies the abnormal, monstrous, exaggerated, unfinished, and irrational, but in a way wherein these concepts are coupled (by artists and authors) with their exact opposite.[2] Geoffrey Galt Harpham indicates that "most grotesques are marked . . . by the co-presence of the normative, fully-formed, 'high' or ideal, and the abnormal, unformed, degenerate, 'low' or material" (9). As example, Harpham refers to drawings of grotesque human heads by Leonardo da Vinci: "Barely but recognizably human, they grade toward some species lower down on the evolutionary or ontological scale, toward a principle of formlessness, primitivism, or bestiality" (9). Because the grotesque "belongs to more than one domain at a time" (Harpham 4), ambivalence reigns as the heart of the aesthetic. In a way suggestive of Sigmund Freud's study "The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words," the aesthetic of the grotesque at once denotes a concept and its polar opposite, and most importantly, the

[2] Here, I present a general definition and summary of the grotesque aesthetic as it appears in literary theory. However, chapter one expands upon theoretical definitions of the aesthetic and offers an alternate way (negation) for readers to grasp the subject.

relations between the two. In doing so, the grotesque is "a mediating principle in the confrontation between order and non-order" (Robertson 1). Cassuto remarks that:

> This idea of disorder is central to the working of the grotesque. Tension is the common element to virtually every definition of the term, and transformation is its most common association. . . .From distorted bodies to oddly twisted tree branches, it appears in the form of anomalies, departures from the norm that carry a peculiar power. These category problems disturb particularly because they question the way in which human beings impose order on the world. The grotesque causes profound distress by bridging and thereby attacking these categories. (114-15)

The aesthetic thus involves incongruous features of different subjects that have been mixed together (Kayser 79, Barasch 10). For Kayser, the grotesque is "the distortion of all ingredients, the fusion of different realms, the coexistence of beautiful, bizarre, ghastly, and repulsive elements, the merger of the parts into a turbulent whole . . ." (79).

Grotesque representations involve physical and psychological abnormalities.[3] Mikhail Bakhtin, Harpham, Kayser, and Thomson, as Alton Kim Robertson summarizes, "have noted the importance of the human body and its deformity or dissolution in operations of the grotesque" (120). Freakish characters often populate grotesque

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[3] As Michael Quigley writes, "The grotesque is commonly associated, of course, with physical deformity" (24). In his study of the grotesque psyche and morality of a fictional character, however, Quigley espouses that the common thread of the grotesque--whether it deals with the physical or the psychological--is incongruity (24). McElroy, observing the predominance of physical deformity in the grotesque, writes that hyperbolism and hybridity, for example, emphasize "the undignified, perilous, even gross physicality of existence . . ." (10). Representations of psychological aberrations, however, occur in grotesque depictions of bizarre behaviours (McElroy 12) and in the "defects of character or of humanity's generally detestable nature" invisible to the naked eye (Griffiths 34).

literature, inspiring questions within readers on identity and standards of normalcy. As Elizabeth Grosz states in her study on freaks:

> Fascination with the monstrous is testimony to our tenuous hold on the image of perfection. The freak confirms the viewer as bounded, belonging to a "proper" social category. The viewer's horror lies in the recognition that this monstrous being is at the heart of his or her own identity, for it is all that must be ejected or abjected from self-image to make the bounded, category-obeying self possible. In other words, what is at stake in the subject's dual reaction to the freakish or bizarre individual is its own narcissism, the pleasures and boundaries of its own identity, and the integrity of its received images of self. (65)

The grotesque is a world disturbing to readers because it is one in which absurdities can and do take place (McElroy 5). Readers respond to the effect the grotesque creates through ambivalence with repulsion, but also a "fascination with the limits of our own identities . . ." (Grosz 65). Similarly, Thomson examines the psychological effect of the grotesque upon readers, maintaining that disgust and amusement (24, 59-61) are aroused, for example, as in the case with the humorous grotesque.[4] Michael Steig argues that the grotesque incites ambivalence and anxiety in readers (256). Typically, the grotesque work of fiction refuses closure, instead leaving readers to deal in ambiguity (Corey 46).

Studies on the grotesque trace the etymological origins of the term to the fifteenth century when archaeological excavations uncovered Nero's Domus Aurea (the Golden

[4] I take up the notion of the humorous in more detail in chapter three.

Palace) in Rome. The excavations of the ancient palace unearthed walls with strange ornamental paintings of hybrid forms: "an intricate symmetry of graceful fantasies, anatomical impossibilities, extraordinary excrescences, human heads and torsos, all delicately intertwined and convoluted with indeterminate vegetation" (Robertson 10). It is to the composite forms on these murals that the term "grotesque" was applied. The word originates from the Italian "*grottesco*," meaning grotto, or cave, since the drawings were unearthed from what had become underground rooms on the ancient site. Harpham's research, which relies on Arthur Claybourgh's *The Grotesque in English Literature*, makes the link between the location of the drawings, their subject matter, and the meaning that was attached to both:

> More because of the setting than because of any qualities inherent in the designs themselves, a consensus soon emerged according to which the designs were called grottesche--of or pertaining to underground caves. Like Vitruvius' judgment, this naming is a mistake pregnant with truth, for although the designs were never intended to be underground, nor Nero's palace a grotto, the word is perfect. The Latin form of grotta is probably crupta (cf. "crypt"), which in turn derives from the Greek Κρύπτη, a vault; one of the cognates is Κρύπτειγ, to hide. Grotesque, then, gathers into itself suggestions of the underground, of burial, and of secrecy. (27)

Thus, the aspect of the hidden, as well as the singularity of the binary opposition of the hybrid forms--both features I discuss at length in chapter one--form part of the grotesque phenomenon.

Art of the grotesque, therefore, exists since ancient times; the term itself, since the fifteenth century. The word has taken on new meanings with time,[5] becoming a literary term in the seventeenth century in France, and later, in England.[6] Frances K. Barasch has researched the history of the grotesque, focusing on the period between 1500 and 1800 in order to outline its modern use today. His work, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings* looks at literature of the grotesque ranging from Chaucer (*Canterbury Tales*), François Rabelais (*Œuvres Complètes)*, Edgar Allan Poe (*Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*), poetry by Robert Browning, H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man, a Grotesque Romance,* and "The Grotesque School" of Italian playwright Pirandello. As a literary term, Barasch points out that, originally, the word appeared in "general histories," such as Thomas Wright's *A History of Caricature & Grotesque* (1865), and in criticism like John Ruskin's famous pronouncements on the grotesque in *The Stones of Venice* (Barasch 156), published between 1851 and 1853. However, it was only in the twentieth century that the term began to take shape in literary criticism (158). Barasch determines that incongruity and absurdity are at the fore of the grotesque (161) and that ultimately "There is no agreement in usage; 'grotesque' is an aesthetic category, a specific genre, a particular style, a form, a repulsive image, and an indeterminable 'world'" (164). The

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[5] One subsequent branch in the visual arts of the discovery, in the Renaissance, of ornamental designs in Rome was "grotto décor": eighteenth century furniture and decoration that features, for example, mixed media such as shells and metal all meant to evoke "secret, naturally hidden places" (Renée Huang, "Grotto Décor Unearths Subterranean Style," *Globe and Mail* Sat. 12 Apr. 2000, R7).

[6] Griffiths 15; "Grotesque" *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists*, 22 April 2004 <http://oxfordreference.com>.

grotesque, he concludes, turns our attention to "the complex disorder of experience and art" (164).

Theorists of the grotesque have always pointed to what are considered the "gaps" of the grotesque, elements that make its manner of operation and its effect difficult to articulate. These gaps arise through the conflict of the grotesque that creates a moment of confusion in the readers' understanding. Robertson describes the grotesque as "the locus of conflict between two contradictory principles" (5). This mirrors Thomson's well-known statement that the grotesque's basic feature is "*the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response*" (27). The "clash" of the grotesque, as Thomson describes it, or the "locus of conflict" in Robertson's words--the moment when, for example, a grotesque paradox appears in the novel, or absurdity becomes oddly paired with the rational--is often described by theorists as unspeakable, or beyond words. For example, the term grotesque, Harpham states, "designates a condition of being just out of focus, just beyond the reach of language" (3). Similarly, Michael D. Greene notes that "When the grotesque is at work in a piece of art or a lived experience, it generally becomes difficult to fit such art or experience into familiar categories or patterns. So potent is this resistance that language itself is hardly adequate to describe the field of the grotesque or to delineate the meaning of the word itself" (7). Such articulations about the effect of confusion are in a way reminiscent of what Rudolf Wittkower writes about the depictions of monsters ("composite beings") whose "ethnological shadow existence sank back into the sphere of magic whenever the innate awe of the monster came to the fore" (197). Theorists tend to describe the effect of the grotesque as one in which

language no longer suffices. The "magic" of the grotesque and the strange response it inspires in readers set it apart from the rules of linguistics and, Harpham and Greene maintain, for example, definable categories of art.

Harpham's *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* compares the response of readers of the grotesque to a paradigm crisis (1982). Using Thomas Kuhn's example of the crisis in science that occurred when Copernicus's sun-centred model collapsed existing paradigms in astronomy, Harpham compares the grotesque realm in art and fiction to:

> the time of transition when scientists shift from one explanation of a given set of phenomena to another . . . when enough anomalies have emerged to discredit an old explanatory paradigm or model, and to make it impossible to continue adhering to it, but before the general acceptance of a new paradigm. The paradigm crisis is the interval of the grotesque writ at large. (17)

In Harpham's analogy, the grotesque signifies a moment in a search for understanding when what is perceived cannot fit into the existing models that normally serve to process and make sense of information. In other words, the confusion of the grotesque forces alternate ways to perceive material. In this study, I shift to a new model of narrative analysis in order to frame the particular phenomenon of the grotesque I observe in fiction.

As I view it, the grotesque as narrative strategy is not something that comes into being "when other words have failed," as Harpham writes (4), but that emerges as a

function of strategic device in the telling of a story. Certainly, in the narratives I study, the grotesque is a locus of confusion because it is a paradox; the grotesque, I would say, makes sense of non-sense (and vice versa). And although, as I discuss in chapter one, there are elements of the grotesque that transcend language, in literature the aesthetic nevertheless begins in language and is created through it, which is to say that it can be "reached" by the critic through language. It is the medium of choice through which the authors I study articulate the aesthetic and, in fact, a particular narrative strategy of the grotesque. There is a slight distinction, therefore, that can be made: whereas Harpham articulates that the grotesque's "widespread use indicates that significant portions of experience are eluding satisfactory verbal formulation," and whereas the readers' experience of the grotesque indeed moves beyond images furnished by an author, I would emphasize that it is nevertheless a verbal formulation that has put the grotesque to work, and that, equally, can render the grotesque approachable for critics and readers.

For example, Harpham shows a sixteenth-century image of a devil playing a pipe[7] and explains how, because of the strangeness and absurdity of the depiction, we cannot describe it in its whole because of the restrictions of language. He writes:

> The quality of grotesqueness arises not so much from the specific contents of the image as from the fact that it refuses to be taken in whole because it embodies a confusion of type. If we did not have the word devil, a category that which, like temptation, serves as a storage-place for demonic non-

[7] Figure 3 in Harpham's text.

> things, we would have no word for it at all. Nor could we describe it easily in its parts, for "chest," "belly," "torso," and so forth do not apply here, although we have no others to substitute for them: the figure is more like a vertebrate than anything else, but of course it is not like a vertebrate. (6)

Harpham thus concludes that "'Grotesque is a word for this paralysis of language" (6). But the theorist cannot become tongue-tied (and indeed, Harpham himself is not silent on the subject); I do not believe that there is any artistic form that truly defies expression in language, even if it is merely to indicate, as Harpham does above, that a phenomenon "refuses to be taken in whole." The grotesque and its operation may be "easier" to summarize through example of visual art--for example, a gargoyle embodying the combination of the monstrous with the divine; a painting that shows half-hidden forms in a disturbing jumble of arms, legs, and scales; the illuminated manuscripts I briefly described earlier. It is an act of "efficiency" to point to a painting by Goya, for example, and remark that "this is grotesque" if it both attracts and repulses viewers, both piques their curiosity and leaves it unsatisfied because the depiction leaves something half-hidden, disturbing viewers through the unfamiliar yet vaguely familiar forms of its image. Yet, the grotesque exists in fiction, and functions for the same reasons it does in art. It does so in words, of course, and for this reason when the grotesque is described as a zone that exists outside of language, I would insist, rather, that it merely "moves" in various ways within readers' sensory perceptions as art is wont to do.

Therefore, even though, as Harpham says, "it is always difficult to think clearly about confusion" (xv), and the grotesque is indeed a domain wherein confusion reigns,

rather than designate the complex and chaotic to the fuzzy realm of "the unspoken" (and hence non-definable for the critic), I examine instead how the grotesque is evoked through the literary critic's medium: language. In the literature I discuss here, the grotesque represents a specific narrative strategy that has come into play. Although I show a paradox of the grotesque--that narrators reveal their identity by telling the story of the loss of their identity--there is no "gap" at work in the actual *study* of the strategy of the grotesque in fiction.

My work focuses on the grotesque as a narrative strategy, and in particular, the use of the aesthetic in the portrayal of female narrators. The prevalence of female grotesque characters in recent Canadian fiction combined with the rapid growth of interest in the critical concept of the female grotesque drew my attention to the need for a theoretical analysis of the literature. Although I provide a concise definition and history of the term here (and expand upon a definition of the grotesque throughout the study), my focus is on feminist theoretical approaches to the grotesque rather than a detailed review of the aesthetic from a general scope.[8] Robertson's work, *The Grotesque Interface*, is parallel to the line of study I take in this study in the way that the critic tries to build on watershed theories of the grotesque by focusing his critical framework on the aesthetic's operation of mediation. However, if by model Robertson means a "set" of propositions, he does not propose a model per se. His approach is to look at conflict in

[8] Numerous studies outline the various meanings of the grotesque aesthetic in literature and art. Mary Catherine Griffiths's "Stranger in a Strange Land: The Grotesque in the Fiction of Margaret Laurence," for example, aptly sums up the history of the term based on the work of influential grotesque theorists, as does the introduction of Greene's dissertation on the grotesque in fiction by Michael Ondaatje, as well as foundational studies by Arthur Clayborough, Wolfgang Kayser, Harpham, Michael Steig, and Thomson. Chapter one of this study offers a detailed and novel approach to its definition.

three novels that touch on the theme of reason or the body--that is, to look at what he calls the "zone of the grotesque" and the processes that work there (14). His model thus consists of a definition, a view of the grotesque "as a function of the conflict between order and disorder" (119), which he subsequently applies to his analysis of different literary works. My work, in contrast, proposes a full method--the middle voice--with which to observe the processes of the aesthetic in Canadian literature.

Studies on the topic of the grotesque in Canadian fiction do not view the grotesque as a narrative strategy. Neither do they explicitly examine subjectivity through the structure of binary opposition so important to the grotesque aesthetic and feminist theory. Catherine Mary Griffiths, who treats the grotesque as a genre, touches on the question that "there may be a special relationship between the grotesque vision and the female experience" (10), but does not take her inquiry any further in her focus of study.[9] Margot Northey's 1976 publication, *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction* was the first study to devote critical attention to the grotesque specifically in Canadian literature. Unfortunately, Northey does not distinguish between the terms grotesque and gothic, claiming instead that the grotesque is "a mode of the gothic, although with its growing importance in twentieth century literature it begins to be a genre in its own right" (8). Her lack of a distinction incites E. D. Blodgett to point out, aptly, that her definition "is so inclusive of both that one wants to know why the need for two terms. Analysis of the two kinds of fiction indicates, moreover, that both modes

[9] At the time Griffiths's study was done, Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque* had not yet appeared nor, obviously, the articles that have since followed Russo's publication that view the grotesque as a female literary form.

serve different purposes" (98). In addition to this major oversight, my point of contention with Northey's study is its tendency to sideline the role of ambivalence in the grotesque. Northey's analysis emphasizes despair and darkness, "the horrifying or fearful aspect" she perceives in the grotesque ("linking it with the gothic," she states) rather than the co-existence of opposites so fundamental, in my view, to the grotesque.

The grotesque aesthetic is neither fantasy nor a mode of the gothic. Whereas the gothic and the grotesque in particular were often conjoined in literary criticism (Northey,[10] Kahane), or the differences between the two were merely overlooked, the grotesque now figures prominently in contemporary fiction (Canadian fiction included) and has been recognized, as I will show, as a distinct category in literary theory. The intersection of the grotesque with fantasy and with the gothic, however, requires clarification.

Certain literary traits overlap between the gothic and the grotesque. Excess (for example, excess in the physical appearance of characters, or the representation of exceedingly violent events) is an important characteristic to both the grotesque and the gothic. Quoting Giorgio Vasari, an eminent sixteenth century art scholar and painter, Harpham indicates that the gothic style is about disorder and confusion (Harpham 26). And both the grotesque and the gothic, Harpham claims, are difficult to seize upon wholly: "Like the grotesque (with which it overlaps in the area of gargoyles and chimeras), the gothic resists precise conceptualization . . . Still the task is not hopeless because the gothic form is so well defined and its origins so undisputed" (*xvii*). But other

[10] See also Northey's note 17 from her introduction wherein she lists several critics who have conflated the two terms.

characteristics of the gothic ultimately set it apart from the grotesque in their marked difference. The most conspicuous of these is that the gothic has always "celebrated its anti-realism" (Becker 1). While Barasch points out that the two terms were related in literature for the Romantics in the 1820's (155), McElroy observes that "the modern grotesque detaches itself from the supernaturalism and Gothic tradition that permeates the mainstream of the nineteenth century grotesque in the works of such writers as Edgar Allan Poe and E. T. A. Hoffman" (22). Griffiths, relying on Philip Thomson, confirms that for the grotesque to function there must appear something realistic and in this way, the grotesque can be distinguished from the gothic (Griffiths 36).

The difference between the element of the supernatural present in the gothic and its absence in the grotesque rings true, I would add, as the principal difference between fantasy and the grotesque. Contrary to the grotesque, the effect of the fantastic on readers requires that a tension exist between two worlds in the minds of readers: the natural and the supernatural (Todorov 25). Thomson shows, for example, that in *The Metamorphoses* the grotesque is present for the very reason of the story's real-world setting: "Kafka is at pains to prevent our taking his story on the level of the supernatural or fantastic, and he explicitly says 'It was no dream'" (7).

Nevertheless, an important point of convergence between fantasy and the grotesque in terms of this study is Rosemary Jackson's articulation of fantasy as "a space for a discourse other than a conscious one" (62). In my discussion, narration is an act that is not clearly a conscious one on the part of the characters who narrate a story (chapter two). Jackson's view, therefore, that "doubling" and "transformation of the

subject, were expressions of unconscious desire" rather than a manifestation of the supernatural (62) underline the similar possibilities fantasy and the grotesque offer in the understanding of identity in the novel, and its paradoxical active/passive dynamics.

Like the link made between the female and the grotesque by Russo, fantasy and the gothic have been paired with the female in literary criticism. Pat Miller's interpretation, for example, of the work of one novelist of the grotesque, maintains that the author uses "fantasy scathingly to attack the myth of romance and marriage . . . most women succumb to" (88).[11] Both fantasy and the grotesque, it is argued, serve to subvert institutions of authority in literature. Miller observes the presence of ambiguity in fantasy literature that "uses the politically feminist implications of fantasy to criticize the status quo . . ." (88); Betty Moss's analysis of Angela Carter's fiction and the female grotesque links fantasy with the grotesque through Carter's "admiration for, appropriation of, and reinvention of wonder tales" (175).

The female gothic, writes Ellen Moers, is a literary mode that refers to gothic literature written by women beginning in the eighteenth century (5). Generally, the gothic novel is one "in which the central figure is a young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine" (Moers 91). Contrary to the strategy of the grotesque, Moers demonstrates that "the gothic has to do with fear. In gothic writings fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural, with one definite auctorial intent: to scare" (90). Claire Kahane argues that it is the confusion of "boundaries of female identity and its relation to

[11] Miller examines fiction by Rachel Ingalls.

power, sexuality and the maternal body, that makes the Female Gothic attractive to female criticism" (243). In *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions*, Susanne Becker believes that the reason gothic fiction has survived for so long is because it is "feminine," and thus "powerful" (2). In my analysis, however, I perceive that the grotesque aesthetic does not concern itself with gender or gender difference. In this way, I agree with Russo's statement that "the category of the grotesque is crucial to identity-formation for both men and women as a space of risk and abjection" (Russo 12).

Griffiths makes the leap to a view of the grotesque "not as a concept of aesthetics, but rather as an ontological one: that which concerns the nature of being" (34). Before beginning my discussion of the question of identity, however, I will first define the term aesthetic to outline in what ways the processes of identity formation take place in the fiction I examine. A response to what is meant by "aesthetic" would point first of all to the identifiable characteristics considered "common" to the art of the grotesque in literature, binary opposition being a principal feature of interest here. But the term also indicates the aesthetic experience of readers who react to the effects created by an author. Thus, the grasp of the meaning of a literary text by readers is mediated by the senses, a "cognitive/sensuous/affective relationship" of the readers to the art,[12] or in a sense, from the reason of the artist, to the feelings of readers. An aesthetic is "the experience derived from an aesthetic object. . . ." (Dickie 37). In this study, the aesthetic object is, of course, fiction of the grotesque. The grotesque in literature becomes "the proper locus of appreciation and criticism (with criticism understood as including description,

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[12] "Aesthetics: Theories of Art and Creativity" course by Robert Sinnerbrink, Maquard University of Australia. 29 April 2003 <http://.phil.mq.edu.au/ug/2003/250/lecture.html>.

interpretation, and evaluation)," a site, in other words, that cultivates an attitude within readers once readers have mediated events and their implications through their senses (Dickie 37). One could argue that all art appeals to the senses in one way or another. What distinguishes the grotesque from other art forms is its play on the logic of ambivalence to create meaning. Furthermore, the role of the negative in the sign of the monster, as expounded in David Williams's work, is a constant reminder to readers of grotesque fiction that representations of reality are consistently undermined and called into question. Consequently, such an aesthetic challenges readers' perceptions, and forces them to function in ways to which they are perhaps not accustomed.

We tend, in fact, to perceive an object through its presence. To illustrate through an example in visual art, the typical approach to drawing a subject--a nude model seated on a chair, for instance--would be to draw the form of the model, and then the objects that fill up the background around her. In this way, the seated model takes precedence over the shapes and objects in her surroundings. The representation of the seated figure materializes in a positive, ordered, and privileged manner in relation to the negative space around the model. As Robertson writes, such a reliance on the perception of presence over absence predominates in thought structures:

> The notion of order is very likely the most compelling and pervasive concept in Western thought, and it could quite easily be considered our "categorical imperative." It is the founding principal of all epistemology, of all science, and of all metaphysics, and no theory of intelligibility would be possible without

> some preconceived and axiomatic understanding of structure, rule and method. (4)

In grotesque fiction, however, subjects are represented through paradox, that is, through an environment that is in opposition to them in some way. Just as, in my example, I define the model seated on a chair by her environment in a way that disturbs the notion of positive over negative,[13] so too are the characters in the novels I discuss defined by theirs. Between Nomi Nickel and her Mennonite community, for example, in Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness*, exists a tension that plays a major role in the rendering of Nomi's identity. And in Gowdy's short story "We So Seldom Look on Love," about necrophilia, the narrator's identity rests on the transgression of a social taboo. In this way, the grotesque obliges readers to place the negative on par with the positive, and to examine familiar "objects" that have become, through the writer's flourish, unfamiliar. Readers of the grotesque aesthetic, therefore, interpret a subject in relation to what is around that subject in a play of space in which there is no "foreground" or "background," only what could be called a particular kind of *middle* ground. This is what I refer to as the strategic construction of the subject in literature of the grotesque.

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[13] Certain drawing exercises, for example, help the artist to emphasize negative space and to bring it up to par with positive space. Perhaps more importantly, these exercises also oblige the artist to forget what she already knows about form and to look and render on paper what she sees rather than what she is accustomed to perceiving, or what she second-guesses, or assumes. One method has the artist begin with a sheet of paper that has been blacked out (with charcoal, for example). The subject is then drawn through the strokes of an eraser. This forces the artist to move in reverse order, from negative to positive. In another exercise, the artist can approach the rendering of the subject by drawing only the objects and spaces around the subject. Thus, instead of drawing the head of the woman posing, the artist draws the armoire behind the man, the space of wall to his right, etc. Forced to create the space around the model, the artist must forget what she knows or assumes about the form of her model, and instead study the variety of shapes surrounding the object, in other words, the forms that ultimately and "indirectly" define the object in question.

A person's identity--what I refer to throughout this study as subjectivity--is generally the "internal" characteristic(s) that are traceable within a person and that mark that person's identity as distinct over time (Butler 282). For my working definition of subjectivity, I combine both linguistic and philosophical accounts. Linguist Emile Benveniste's definition of subjectivity refers to "the property of language by which utterances reflect the standpoint of the speaker."[14] In philosophy, subjectivity refers to "the subject and his or her particular perspective, feelings, beliefs, and desires." It is a "phenomenological experience, or 'what it's like to be' a certain conscious being . . ."[15] As the roots of the term suggest, subjectivity--regardless of whether it plays a role in grotesque narratives or not[16]--is not without its own contradiction: "the very term we use as a mark of self-reference (subjectivity) comes from the Latin verb *subicere*--to place or throw under, to submit, subject . . ." (Robertson 4). Thus, in the sense of the word, subjectivity implies that we actively posit ourselves when we refer to ourselves as "I"; there is also, however, a passive, submissive meaning to the term as its etymology indicates.

Catherine Belsey's article "Constructing the Subject" helps to define what I mean by "the construction of the subject" in grotesque literature (although accordingly, I need to emphasize that my argument points to both the simultaneous construction and

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[14] "Subjectivity," *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics,* P. H. Matthews. 1997, *Oxford Reference Online*, Oxford U P, 19 March 2003 <http://www.oxfordreference.com/>.

[15] "Subjectivity," *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 19 March 2005 <www.oxfordreference.com/>. The definition of "subject" is discussed at length in chapter two.

[16] In this study, I show the contradiction of identity formation in narrative through a non-grotesque novel (*Alias Grace*) as well as through grotesque literature.

dismantling of the subject in fiction). Subjectivity materialises when an individual participates in discourse (Belsey 660)--to speak, in other words, is to be. Pointing to Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's research, Belsey writes that it is language that provides subjects with a range of different positions through which subjects render themselves and their connections with the world. In my study of literature, however, I point to Benveniste's notion that characters are only identifiable as subjects in the exact moment in which they speak. Characters positing themselves as the "I" of a narrative are not necessarily the same "I" in another situation of the same narrative. Furthermore, in my discussion on the "middle voice," I show how authors confuse the notion of agency so that even within a specific speech act, a person seems to be two people in one, and thus the concept of identity becomes obscure.

My study of fiction of the grotesque and its "doubled" female characters shows extreme contradictions at the level of fictional characterization. The grotesque confounds the identity-formation of fictional characters. Because I analyze identity in fiction of the grotesque and the conundrum of representations wherein identities are doubled and confounded for readers, I address theories that explicate how a subject is constituted in literature. In Jackson's and Belsey's work, there is a strong link between subjectivity and ideology. This relationship underlines that in the fiction I study, the grotesque aesthetic disturbs founding principles of representation. Belsey establishes that in fiction subjects are constructed through ideology. Furthermore (and here I am reminded of Robertson's statement about the contradictory meaning of the term

"subject"[17]), becoming a subject through ideology is both an active and a passive process. Jackson shows that subjectivity-formation occurs at an unconscious level.

"One of the central issues for feminism is the cultural construction of subjectivity," Belsey states (657). The way that the subject is constructed is through ideology: an individual becomes a member of society when he or she enters into language and accepts the systems of culture and society that language embodies. Only when the individual enters this system of language does he or she become a "full subject" (660). According to Belsey's reading of Louis Althusser, the constitution of the subject through language and ideology is both an active and a passive process for the individual:

> The subject is not only a grammatical subject, "a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions," but also a subjected being who submits to the authority of the social formation represented in ideology as the Absolute Subject (God, the king, the boss, Man, conscience) . . . (qtd. in Belsey 660-61)

Literature, "as one of the most persuasive uses of language," plays a role in the process of the construction of the subject in the way readers relate to fictional circumstances and, subsequently, their own relations with the real world (Belsey 662).

In the literature I examine, women are constituted as subjects through language and ideology, but they are also, paradoxically, constituted as beings that resist identity formation. Authors establish connections between the fictional subject they represent, and the coming into being of that subject in the way that they position their speaking subject in language. As well, authors constitute the coming into being of their subjects

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[17] As cited in this study on page 24.

through the connections made (or dismantled) between them and their society. I discuss, by means of the concept of the "middle voice" in chapter two, fictional characters who are portrayed as simultaneously active and passive in the very process in which, as fictional characters, they "normally" become recognizable as individuals. This active/passive dynamic confounds the readers' understandings of the fictional character, and plays out ideologically, for when the subject's consciousness is fragmented or unstable, so too are his/her beliefs, and thus the manner in which s/he interacts as a member of society.

The construction of women as subjects in fiction is thus a cultural, ideological act. Relying on Althusser, Belsey points out that readers are in a position wherein they are a "*subject in (and of) ideology,*" a position from which they can make sense of the text, and which the text relies on to be made sense of (657).[18] In the words of Glenn Deer, "All literature . . . presents world-views or ideologies, and, often, critical attitudes to particular social institutions, to the use of power, and to the nature of particular forms of authority" (9). Ideology is "a system of representations (discourses, images, myths) concerning the real relations in which people live" (Belsey 657). Jackson's examination of how texts treat the relationship between ideology and the subject in fantasy literature defines ideology as something that inhabits and plays out in the unconscious:

> Ideology--roughly speaking, the imaginary ways in which men experience the real world, those ways in which men's relation to the world is lived through various systems of meaning such as religion, family, law, moral

[18] Belsey refers specifically to realist fiction here (657).

> codes, education, culture, etc.--is not something simply handed down from one conscious mind to another, but is profoundly unconscious. (61)

Jackson shows that fantasy literature is about how subjectivity is constituted through the unconscious. The relationship between self ("I") and other ("not-I") in fantasy literature revolves around desire, Jackson states, which is unconscious (51). A subject is formed through what she desires unconsciously, and fantasy literature is a way of representing this unconscious material. Alienation, doubling, and metamorphosis are all expressions of unconscious desire. In fiction of the grotesque, I examine characters whose identity should, theoretically, become clear through their speech. Instead, they become confused subjects for readers because, when they narrate, the act of their speech is simultaneously a conscious and an unconscious act. The construction and confounding of women as subjects in the grotesque fiction I examine is a system of representation. It is ideological because it upholds "both a real and an imaginary relation to the world . . ." (Belsey 658).

In chapter one, I survey existing criticism of the grotesque and the feminist grotesque in order to establish a working definition of the grotesque aesthetic for this study, illustrating the definition through a comparison of non-grotesque writing (Gabrielle Roy) and grotesque fiction (Alice Munro). In chapter two, I identify the grotesque's central strategy: at the narrative level characters become doubled, their identity perpetually confounded for readers. Chapter two contributes to feminist and narrative theory by showing that the alternative to binary opposition (male/female) lies in grammar. This theoretical framework, based on the "middle voice," is illustrated through

analysis of fiction by Barbara Gowdy and Margaret Atwood. In chapter three, I explore the reasons why authors might adopt the grotesque as an aesthetic that allows for sustained contradiction and thus a very open-ended and complex representation of character. In this way, I demonstrate what critics have overlooked: a remarkable contradiction at the level of fictional characterization. Doubled, ambivalent identities in literature of the grotesque undermine the fundamental notion of fictional characterization: namely, that it is consistent. However, through analysis of fiction by Coady and Toews, I argue for a new conceptualization of subjectivity.

CHAPTER ONE

My working definition of the grotesque is a narrative strategy wherein contradiction is sustained, and subjectivity simultaneously created and confounded. Up until now, I have derived this definition from a survey of critical literature on the grotesque and its main characteristics, as well as from theoretical approaches to the meaning of and processes behind subjectivity in fiction, all of which have led me to determine the grotesque's key feature: the problematic formation of central fictional subjects. As discussed in the introduction to this study, subjectivity refers to the identity or consciousness of a fictional character revealed through a character's speaking act.[19] The introduction traces definitions of the grotesque in criticism and distinguishes it specifically from the gothic. The importance of the characteristics of absurdity (and non-absurdity), exaggeration (and accuracy), irrationality (and rationality), and deformity in confounding readers' understanding of a "monstrous narrator" in the grotesque aesthetic were indicated. In this chapter, I provide an extended version of the definition of the grotesque. I also examine how the grotesque has been viewed as a specifically feminine literary form and argue that this approach is inadequate for the analysis of fiction.

This study defines the grotesque aesthetic as a narrative strategy authors employ to construct subjectivity. I do not look at women in terms of how they are represented in relation to men, but rather at how they are fashioned through the grotesque. Therefore, the power struggles at the basis of first-wave and second-wave feminism that rely on the male/female opposition do not apply. What then do we discover in contemporary

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[19] See the definition of subjectivity in the introduction.

Canadian fiction about the representation of "subjectivity" in an aesthetic whose dichotomy "subject/monster" bypasses the conventional relation of female subjectivity to gender?

I demonstrate that the aesthetic strategy of the grotesque functions to simultaneously confuse and enlighten readers in their perception and experience of fiction. My original analysis of this strategy of the grotesque is an attempt to cultivate a method that can engage with narrative representation in contemporary fiction. Once I have outlined the important grotesque structure of *via negativa*, I will focus primarily on what is known as the "female grotesque" and on my own literary response to this theory. I will also examine at length--as it relates to feminist theory and the notion of the female grotesque--the dialectical structure of the aesthetic in fiction and the way this opposition plays out upon readers of grotesque literature.

Although critics have not categorized the aesthetic as such until now, I argue that the grotesque aesthetic is a narrative strategy, as the Canadian fiction I examine demonstrates. Through the grotesque, authors are able to express to readers, in two important ways, qualities of abjection that narrators experience in fiction. The first is that the grotesque has an effect upon readers that distinguishes it from other kinds of literary narrative: readers experience abjection at several different levels, I demonstrate, and in such a way that, as Harpham and Williams stress in their discussion of the aesthetic's effect, the grotesque in literature transcends words to inhabit readers' sensory perception. The second expressive capacity of the grotesque is that it enables authors to portray women's experience in a way that is not related to gender, at least not in the

way that feminist grotesque theory, principally Russo's *The Female Grotesque*, has so far established the grotesque as "gendered writing," or as a "feminine aesthetic." That is, feminists and critics of the grotesque have neither contested the notion of the "feminine" grotesque nor regarded the strategy of the grotesque as one that side-steps gender notions of male/female.

Definition of the grotesque (as what it *is-not*) and *via negativa*

One aspect of the grotesque in literature is that it is not merely the presence of the monstrous, the unfamiliar, or the chaotic. As an aesthetic it involves, rather, a struggle that occurs between opposites within a text, between a monstrous act, for example, and its non-monstrous counterpart. Readers will likely respond to something that seems both familiar and unfamiliar, both chaotic and orderly, with ambivalence. "Torn in two" because of simultaneous feelings of attraction and repulsion, or negative and positive feelings toward a literary event in the grotesque novel, we can say that the opposition of the aesthetic breeds opposition (ambivalence) in readers.

The struggle of the grotesque aesthetic exists only as long as some form of opposition continues, and a paradoxical "balance" is sustained, which means that no dominant element--such as utter confusion in a novel, or characters so deformed that readers cannot recognize anything typical about them--upsets the equilibrium. When, however, theorists of the grotesque, such as Wolfgang Kayser, focus on the grotesque as the purely absurd (Kayser's main thesis), or the low (Robert Doty's argument[20]), we lose sight of the dual nature of this literary strategy, and the very "state" of the grotesque

[20] Doty's text, *Human Concern / Personal Torment: The Grotesque in American Art*, has no pagination.

escapes us. But if we are to envision the workings of the grotesque in literature, which have to do with concepts of paradox, contradiction, and readers' "ambivalent emotional reactions" (Harpham 8)--concepts that are themselves dual in structure rather than singular--then we must maintain the double-mode of the grotesque in our approach to it.

What is required, therefore, is a manner of examining the grotesque that can accommodate what I believe is, and define as, the essential configuration of the literary aesthetic:

The grotesque is this, and it is the negation of this.

My definition marks a shift from Philip Thomson's statement that the grotesque is "*the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response*" (27) by stressing the opposition inherent in the aesthetic and its sustained positive and negative elements. I also, by way of this statement, position the grotesque within the system of negation in theology and philosophy known as *via negativa*.

As a means of reaching the grotesque state of "it is this, and it is the negation of this," I will draw loosely on the system of *via negativa*, as outlined by David Williams in *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*. The act of affirmation ("the grotesque is") and subsequent denial ("the grotesque *is-not*") are the very acts involved in contradiction, paradox, and ambivalence; these literary strategies transcend, in the minds of readers, the struggle of opposing forces in the grotesque novel. "When 'yes' turns into 'no,'" Anne Carson writes of the "transformations" of denial, "there is a sudden vanishing and a shift to meaning, there is a tilt and realignment of the listener's world-view" (4). Whereas Kayser, for example,

writes that "THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD" (184), I believe it necessary, in an examination of the aesthetic, to move from the limitations of such an affirmation to a statement that recognizes a condition of contrariety. Williams, for example, evokes the example of the iconograph of the "bearded maiden," a saint with both male and female physical traits: "the audience encounters simultaneously the imperative of gender as the basis of identity and knowledge and the imperative of negating gender as a means of transcending identity and knowledge" so as to reach a state of "*knowing from the inside* . . ." (320).

The grotesque evokes the nature of human subjectivity (the focus of this study) but does so, as Williams writes (in reference to the divine), by the negation of what readers normally rely on as "the criterion of understanding and through the negation of similitude as the basis of representation" (321). To demonstrate, I argue that Alice Munro's short story, "Fits," provides a good example of contrariety and negation at work in the grotesque aesthetic; Gabrielle Roy's writing, on the other hand, while at times displaying the same themes and devices found in Munro's grotesque fiction (thus making it an excellent point of comparison), ultimately resists the aesthetic effect of the grotesque and prevents it from occurring. Through comparisons of the writing of Alice Munro (grotesque) and Gabrielle Roy (non-grotesque), therefore, I will regard the grotesque through what it "is" and "*is-not*" in order to attain, in the process, the possibilities of evocation.

In the context of what does and does not qualify as grotesque literature according to the characteristics of the aesthetic I will describe shortly, Gabrielle Roy's fiction in its

darkest, most disturbing moments, elicits the following questions: what are the aspects of Roy's writing that distinguish it from grotesque fiction? If Roy's fiction contains *elements* of the grotesque, what prevents the aesthetic from operating as it does in writing by an author such as Munro? A comparison of the distressing elements in Roy's *The Tin Flute*, *Alexandre Chenevert*, and *Enchanted Summer* with Munro's short story "Fits" is helpful in illuminating the differences between fiction in which the grotesque aesthetic functions (Munro's), and fiction like Roy's in which readers are never quite placed in the realm of the grotesque. This is not to say, categorically, that Roy's work is not grotesque: several of Roy's early short stories, for example, published in small magazines in the 1940s certainly contain grotesque images,[21] although they lack the sophistication of the author's later fiction.[22] A study of Roy's well-known work,[23]

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[21] There is a difference between a grotesque image and the grotesque aesthetic. In a novel, if a man suddenly loses his foot, the image becomes grotesque because the man has become incomplete, unfinished, because there is violence that is destabilizing, and because of the clash of opposites between what was once an extension of the leg and what has become a disturbing gaping absence (a "normal" leg vs. an unexpectedly abnormal leg). But the grotesque aesthetic involves the overall effects of a text and a characteristic I term "hiddenness," which I will elaborate upon shortly. A novel may contain a grotesque image without being a novel of the grotesque aesthetic.

[22] In the 1940s, Gabrielle Roy wrote several short stories, some of which she published in small magazines. From the primitive caveman in "Dieu" (1948) whose wall drawings show his obsession with death, to the swollen cadavers polluting the waters of Roy's version of the story of Noah's Ark ("Le déluge" 1948), to domestic violence in "La lune des moissons" (1947), to overeating and the hoarding of food in "La grande voyageuse" (1942), many of Roy's early stories present a consistent concern with exaggeration, violence, and the bizarre. If anything, as far as the grotesque is concerned, these writings raise the question of whether the aesthetic can operate when there is an *over*-abundance of shocking and absurd elements. But the main issue that underlies their exclusion from this study is that the sophistication of Roy's canonical writings has little in common with the level of writing of these early stories, and their subject matter does not lend itself easily to comparison with the subject matter of Roy's well-known work, or to fiction by Munro. What these short stories do make evident is that Roy's canonical fiction is, for the most part, much less graphically violent than many of her earlier unpublished or "semi-published" short stories (stories published in small magazines). Whether Roy suppressed a tendency toward the sombre after the 1940s is, however, a matter for another study. I would like to express a special thank you to Yannick Roy for his insight regarding Roy's early short stories.

however, provides the opportunity to consider how the mode of perception of "negation" reveals, in a sense, what ultimately cannot be shown. It also points to a fundamental aspect of the grotesque that I term "hiddenness."

Susan Corey summarizes the work of theorists Robert Doty, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, and Mikhail Bakhtin and proposes the following definition of the grotesque in literature and art:

> an aesthetic form that works through exaggeration, distortion, contradiction, disorder, and shock to disrupt a sense of normalcy and stimulate the discovery of new meaning and new connections. In its capacity to shock and offend . . . it taps the resources of the body and the unconscious to open up new worlds of meaning and to expose the gaps in our conventional meaning systems. (32)

In other words, for Corey, the grotesque is the means "to bring the reader up short, jolt him out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective" (Thomson 58), obliging readers not only to take another look at what they are presented with in a work of fiction, but also to change the *way* in which they habitually perceive a concept. An author accomplishes this feat through aesthetic devices, such as "paradox, distortion or degradation, and the clash of seemingly incompatible elements, all of which evoke a reader's heightened sense of

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[23] The short story "The Wheelchair," in which an Inuit man confined to a wheelchair is accidentally left out all night by a group of careless children and ends up resembling, after his horrendous experience, "some vegetable creature which had been spoiled by too much water"; the rape scene in *Windflower*; the brain damage suffered by Alicia in *Street of Riches*; and the subject of illness and death in "The Satellites," all generously brought to my attention by Jane Everett and François Ricard at the conception of this chapter, are other examples of Roy's concern for the slightly bizarre and significantly darker aspects of life. I have tried to present the fiction by Roy that I believe best illustrates the author's general refusal of the grotesque aesthetic.

awareness . . ." (Corey 32). Once readers have read a passage that is grotesque, so her theory goes, the sensation of discomfort provoked by the aesthetic typically leads readers to grasp what they have read in a new and revealing manner.

Corey's theoretical summary of the grotesque points us, so far, to the effects of the aesthetic upon readers; Alice Munro's writing provides us with an example of the aesthetic at work in fiction. In Munro's short story "Fits," readers are in the presence of the grotesque when things don't "fit" together at all. The collision of the functional and the dysfunctional creates an eruption (an earthquake, a fit) for the townspeople and, consequently, for readers. However, it also unveils the fact that, in Munro's setting, the potential for such a "periodic fit" (164) is always present, ever-threatening, and strangely, a part of everyday life.

In a small Ontario town called Gilmore, Peg drops by her neighbours' house and discovers a brutal murder-suicide: Mr Weebles has shot his wife, and then turned the gun on himself. The town is soon abuzz with the grisly news. Considering the violence that has happened next door, the account given from the point of view of Peg's husband, Robert, is startlingly sober:

> What had gone on at first, Robert gathered, was that people had got on the phone, just phoned anybody they could think of who might not have heard. Karen had phoned her friend Shirley, who was at home in bed with the flu, and her mother, who was in the hospital with a broken hip. It turned out her mother knew already--the whole hospital knew. And Shirley said, "My sister beat you to it." (154)

The townspeople described in this passage could just as easily be reacting to the news of a grand store opening, or a secret, illicit engagement. Suddenly, there is a distastefully humorous shift from the tragedy itself to something else (the dynamics of gossip). The delight of "being in the know" is flaunted, despite the horrific event. It is thus not merely or entirely the description of the grisly murder-suicide that has a grotesque effect on readers of this story. Rather, I believe it has to do with the disturbing combination Munro creates between the gruesome event of the murder and the ordinariness of the small-town in all its details. The abnormal (murder-suicide) collides with the normal (common chatter, small-town anonymity) resulting in the foundational incongruity of the grotesque and its impact on readers.

The grotesque atmosphere in "Fits," however, is one where there is a continual potential for bad things to happen, for even once the initial fit of violence has taken place next door, a menace continues to underlie everything common in Gilmore. It is as though the townspeople have tapped into a dangerous source that had always been accessible, a part of their lives, but that had remained dormant, or suppressed, beneath daily routine and chatter about the weather: "in Gilmore . . . assurances are supposed to be repeated, and in fact much of conversation is repetition, a sort of dance of good intentions, without surprises" (140). Robert, the neighbour of the unfortunate Weebles, has always sensed an unseen danger, couched in the safety of repetition: "Just occasionally, talking to people, he feels something else, an obstruction, and isn't sure what it is (malice? stubbornness?) but it's like a rock at the bottom of a river when you're swimming--the clear water lifts you over it" (140). Indeed, criticism of the story identifies

the aspect of "appearance and illusion, camouflage and deception . . . " (Ventura 89) that creates tension through the presence of various contradictions. Peg's story becomes "simultaneously fraudulent and respectable" writes Héliane Ventura in her study of anamorphosis in "Fits." In a psychoanalytical study of Munro's short story, Hanly describes Peg's and Robert's denial of painful realities as a "disguised disclosure" that places the role of the unconscious at the forefront in the relationship between text, author, and readers (173).[24] In "Fits," "Truth-telling is seen as a destructive, dangerous reduction to nakedness . . ." (Jarrett 88).

Munro diverts readers from the crime scene to its "after-shock," manifested in the townspeople's reactions. Readers thus move involuntarily from the blood and guts of the murder-suicide to the incessant buzzing of the creatures attracted by its smell. As a result of this delay--the temporary masking of the crime scene--as well as the threatening atmosphere and irreconcilable elements that are not resolved in Munro's story, readers may feel uncomfortable and scramble to alleviate both a sense of curiosity and unease. Out of the readers' confusion the possibility of transformation, even transcendence, may appear, for as Harpham points out, "Confused things lead the mind to new inventions."[25] Moreover, "the essential paradox of the grotesque," writes Thomson, is "that it is both liberating and tension-producing at the same time" (61).

But how, in a literary analysis, do we maintain, rather than reduce, the paradox of the grotesque in our presentation of it? If Thomson's quote above relays that the

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[24] Hanly's thesis in his discussion of "displacement," among other things, links Munro autobiographically to her story.

[25] As Harpham indicates in an epigraph to chapter seven, the citation originates from Leonardo da Vinci (*On the Grotesque: Strategies in Art and Contradiction*, 146).

grotesque is simultaneously "liberating" *and* constraining, what else do we neglect to say in this very statement? How can we avoid the problem that the grotesque is, in Susan Corey's words, "easier to describe than to define" (32)? To speak through assertion, that is, to say that the grotesque in Munro "is this," the grotesque "is that," is to risk overlooking its other facets and diminishing its complexity through language. In *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*, Williams writes:

> Affirmative discourse is, again, necessary but limiting. Every affirmation about a subject imposes a limitation on it, because affirmation functions through differentiation. To call the dog brown, or to name it Spot, is to limit it to its name and colour, or whatever quality is noted. While this is clearly useful for logical understanding and discrimination between things of the same kind, what becomes clear through a negative critique of affirmation is the inability of language to present the wholeness of its subject. (32)

Contradiction and paradox, however, are not simple matters of "logical" discussion, and the aesthetic of the grotesque is more complicated than determining one dog to be brown, another grey. Like Jacques Derrida's famous term "differance" (spelt with an "a" instead of an "e" to signal a double meaning), which defies the categories of speech and writing (since its two definitions are not visible when the term is read on paper, and because its peculiar graphic form is inaudible to the listener[26]), the grotesque

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[26] On the term "differance," Derrida stated in his lecture that: "This differance belongs to neither the voice nor to the writing in that ordinary sense, and it takes place, like the strange space that will assemble us here for the course of an hour, *between* speech and writing and beyond the tranquil familiarity that binds us to one and to the other, reassuring us sometimes in the illusion that they are two separate things" (134).

phenomenon exists in the between-space of what is said and what is evoked. The strategy of "Fits," for example, is one in which readers perceive the decency of a small town and its inhabitants only once it is evoked through violence (the opposite of decent behaviour).

Theorists certainly define the grotesque through the structure of binary opposition, that is, the juxtaposition of two opposites (such as normal/abnormal) that creates an effect upon readers. Yet, although binary opposition is a two-sided structure, grotesque criticism almost inevitably views one side as the dominant, the other as its inferior. Thus, Corey writes that the grotesque is "Anti-rational by nature" (32), rather than both rational and anti-rational, and that it functions to "undermine the status-quo," instead of also reinforcing it as a perpetually dialectic strategy. Similarly, Ralph Ciancio writes that the grotesque is a world in which "the categories of a rational and familiar order fuse, collapse, and finally give way to the absurd" (1). And according to Kayser, the grotesque is a world that *temporarily* and *periodically* falls victim to "demonic" forces (188). The "laws" of binary opposition, that "two poles must not only be opposed to each other but must also be in exclusive opposition to each other" reinforce the manner in which such theorists, in their definition of the grotesque, lean toward either mutual exclusion or the relegation of one side of a grotesque dichotomy to a lesser position of importance ("Binary").

In Munro's story, however, the familiar world is inextricably linked to the unfamiliar: it exists only through its darker sphere, and vice versa. The town of Gilmore is in a state where the "demonic" is always present, only hidden. Again, I am drawn to Derrida's

theorizing of the term "differance," which he describes as a thing that loses its essence when revealed, like a mystery that can no longer qualify as such once its solution has been unearthed: "Any exposition would expose it to disappearing as a disappearance" Derrida contends. "It would risk appearing, thus disappearing" (134). Indeed, Derrida mentions the similarity between his method of differance and negative theology (134). The method of representation of *via negativa* lies at the origin of the grotesque sign (Williams 4-5) and can, even when applied loosely as it is here, accommodate the aesthetic in terms that are accessible to the theorist of the grotesque.

The system of *via negativa* in theology applies to a manner of approaching the divine by moving beyond the human system of words or signs--beyond language--since "God transcends human knowledge utterly and can be known only by what He is not . . ." (Williams 5). Negative theology, Peter Haidu writes, is a way to "deploy modes of discourse that acknowledge divinity without presentifying it" (278). Williams shows that, as a mediaeval sign, the monstrous (the grotesque) could evoke more about the divine through difference and through what the divine *is-not* (God as a two-headed squid becomes God is not a two-headed squid, for example), than could a symbol of affirmation. In the process of *via negativa*, naming God as a two-headed squid is a recognition of the inadequacy of affirmation to communicate not just the wholeness of God, but also the non-representability of God. There is a paradox involved in the act of acknowledging God through human language.

In *via negativa*, one begins by building up a subject (such as being) with assertions--often absurd assertions--in order to question whether reason and intellect

are sufficient to evoke the essence of things (Williams 5). Once the assertive statements have been made (God symbolized as a two-headed squid), the subject is then "dismantled" through negation (God *is-not* a two-headed squid):

> The more unwonted and bizarre the sign, it was thought, the less likely was the beholder to equate it with the reality it represented . . . After this process of affirming and negating, the mind, encountering a reality beyond affirmation and negation, a reality which is-not, finally knows God as paradox: the One who is source of the many, beyond being yet cause of being, present everywhere within the world while totally transcendent. (4)

Contradictory, multiple, and elusive, the grotesque is well-suited to an approach through that which it *is-not*, for like Derrida's non-thing, the revealing of it would jeopardise its status as something that cannot be revealed (134). By saying the grotesque "is not" this, the grotesque becomes, in Williams's terms, "*more* than what it is named" (33).

Therefore, in this study aimed at identifying strategies of the grotesque aesthetic, we can start with the affirmative (Munro's writing is grotesque), move to the negative (Roy's writing is not grotesque), and end with a "sense" of the multiple aspects of what we are trying to know. We will thus use words to move language into a certain realm of the aesthetic.

The published body of Gabrielle Roy's work is not known for its grotesque content in general, although poverty in *The Tin Flute*, alienation in *The Cashier*, and the death of a child in *Enchanted Summer* are examples of the "darker" aspects of Roy's storytelling. Roxanne Rimstead, in *Remnants of Nation: On Poverty Narratives by Women*, looks at

what she terms "grotesque mothering" in Roy's depictions of relationships between mothering and poverty in *The Tin Flute*:

> mothering and poverty meet at more points of tension. As they construct each other they are twisted into a macabre union under the pressure of the social system. Rose-Anna cannot sew clothing fast enough to keep all her children attending school, nor feed them well enough to stave off hunger and illness. . . . As martyr, Rose-Anna constructs her family's experience of poverty by taking it inside herself, as far as possible, and transforming its ugliness, its shamefully diseased and grotesque outsider nature in a mothering gesture. (81)

Rose-Anna's endless struggle against poverty and the glaring injustices of hunger, ostracism, and suffering is, as Rimstead's powerful analysis illustrates, grotesque. Yet, Roy's handling of her poverty narrative does not involve the grotesque aesthetic if we enquire into the sensations and effects created (or not) by the novel's opposition of mothering and poverty.

Roy's novel is a work of social realism, as Rimstead illustrates. Tim Libretti writes that "the proletarian grotesque enables authors to represent the very normal and real horrors and monstrosities of everyday working-class life under capitalism, which otherwise might be too difficult and painful to rehearse without the buffer of laughter and the anodyne of genuine hope" (172-73).[27] Libretti's reading of grotesque writing through the "proletarian grotesque" shares the view with my own reading of *The Tin Flute* that

[27] Libretti points out that definitions of the grotesque (by McElroy and Thomson, for example) are typically founded upon bourgeois rather than working-class notions of normalcy (173).

class difference becomes horrifying when it is shown to be familiar or normal. However, Roy does not invoke the grotesque as a "buffer of laughter" to ease the hard reality of the society she portrays. She does not seek to *distance* "the reader from the familiar situation . . . to force the reader to reflect on the situation she normally takes for granted because of its familiarity" (Libretti 173) by revealing and concealing elements. Are readers, for example, prompted to move ahead on their own to try and reconcile what cannot be reconciled as a means of filling in the narrative gaps? Roy's narrative does not use concealment as a strategy in the depiction of grotesque elements (such as the demands of endless chores); it involves, instead, a strategy of revelation.

In *The Tin Flute*, there is a refusal of the grotesque aesthetic, that is, a refusal to leave things unsaid or unconnected. When Rose-Anna leaves the hospital after visiting her six-year-old son Daniel, who is dying of leukaemia, having been shut out from the community of care-givers since they speak only English, having only sensed rather than fully understood the nature of Daniel's illness (which is terminal), and after having borne the sting of the affection shown by her son toward the paid nurse, the narrative reveals the source of Rose-Anna's predicament in clear terms. That source is poverty:

> Rose-Anna was in the dark corridor. Her step was hesitant because of the feeble light and her fear that she wouldn't find the exit. One thought filled her mind with reproach: Daniel had all he needed here. He had never been so happy. She didn't understand it and tried to find the reason. A sentiment with the taste of poison stuck in her throat. So they've taken him from me too,

> she thought, and it's easy to take him, he's so small! . . . Never had she felt her poverty so intensely. (228)

In view of the various forms of social wealth that surround Rose-Anna and which point to a shocking misdistribution of power (and thus the contrast of poverty with wealth), Rose-Anna's situation is absurd and excessive, both of which, when paired with their polar opposite, are characteristics of the grotesque. However, the tension generated through features of absurdity and excessiveness is deflated by Roy's gestures of containment when Rose-Anna is faced with the hideous claims made by the disease upon Daniel's little body. Her shame is framed--and thus exposed and contained--within an absurd contradiction whereby the health system tells Rose-Anna what she must do in order to be a responsible mother while failing to provide (and indeed obstructing) the means with which she might meet the needs of her family: "She remembered that they'd talked at the clinic about the right kind of diet to make sure the bones and teeth were properly formed and to ensure good health. What a joke! And they'd said that kind of food was within the reach of every budget! They had shown her clearly what her duty was" (219). Social ills are mapped-out in clear terms of "duty," "deficiencies," "shame," and "illness," thwarting the possibility of a grotesque effect, which relies on confusion (Harpham 191) to muddle and disturb readers, and to incite curiosity and dissatisfaction.

Thus, when Rose-Anna sets out to look for a new house to rent, angry with the realization that "the bigger the family, the smaller and darker grew their lodgings" (93), therein lie the irreconcilable elements (and thus the ingredients for the grotesque)--the growth of a family (encouraged by Church and State, and indeed, by an inadequate

health system) and the lack of a protective, decent abode for it: "Springtime! What had it ever meant to her? In her married life it had meant two things: being pregnant and going out pregnant, to look for a place to live" (93).[28] Mothering and poverty do indeed form a binary opposition. However, the dominating principle of social inequality--dominating because it is depicted as the root of the union of mothering and poverty (Rimstead 81)--overrides the play (the gaps and inconsistencies) of grotesque elements in the novel. In other words, the dominance of one concept forms a hierarchy that the grotesque aesthetic cannot accommodate.

In contrast, Munro's story provides no term or logic to contain the disturbing outbreaks in this story: they are only "freak occurrences." It is not just a matter of a neighbour who has violently killed his wife, but rather, a matter of an entire, all-consuming spasm that takes over all aspects of town life, destabilizing labels such as "victim" and "perpetrator," or notions of safety, neutrality, and distance. "The interval of the grotesque" writes Harpham, "is the one in which, although we have recognized a number of different forms in the object, we have not yet developed a clear sense of the *dominant* principle that defines it and organizes its various elements" (16; emphasis mine). Unlike *The Tin Flute*, violence and freak behaviour in "Fits" is not determined by

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[28] It is absurd that Rose-Anna--equipped with all her motherly instincts, desires, and skills--cannot fulfil her function as primary care-giver because of the way the system works against her. Equally absurd are the very demands of the social system placed upon her to fulfil that role. In polar opposition to this (socio-economic) absurdity is the "normalcy" of poverty in Rose-Anna's society: it is accepted, even commonplace. In the novel, Rose-Anna is only one of many women who have to move every year with their family, and who live in extreme poverty. The normalcy of Rose-Anna's predicament means that it is absurd and yet also horribly logical or rational in view of the role the Church and State play, for example, in placing unrealistic and unhealthy demands upon women. Similarly, on the opposite spectrum of excess (Rose-Anna's poverty) lies the absolute dearth of resources Rose-Anna can rely on outside of her own personal resourcefulness to meet the needs of her family. Binary oppositions in the novel between absurdity and rationality, and between excess and insufficiency, reflect the traits of the grotesque aesthetic.

or attributed to socio-economic, psychological, or even physiological, conditions. The story is not driven by logical causality. When Robert listens to the various theories as to the cause of the double death--loss of money, cancer, Alzheimer's disease--he feels that if he could only believe one of them, "it would have been as if something had taken its claws out of his chest and permitted him to breathe" (156).

A novel, then, that contains several "grotesque elements" is not necessarily one in which an author employs a grotesque aesthetic. I would identify the act of concealment--what I term as "hiddenness"--as the fundamental element that is absent from the social realism of *The Tin Flute* and that prevents the grotesque from occurring. This is not a new feature of the grotesque: theorists such as Harpham and Williams have always maintained that there is something unfinished or unsatisfactory in the grotesque image. Although the tragic, unacceptable poverty of *The Tin Flute* is an "everyday struggle of resistance" (Rimstead 77) enacted by the community of Saint-Henri and is somewhat suggestive of the futile attempts Munro's townspeople make to understand recent violent events (158-59), and although Rose-Anna tries to confine the debilitating effects of poverty within herself (Rimstead 82-83), poverty is never subdued in the novel. It is always present, always on display, continually connected to the social ills it produces.[29]

Munro engages readers in a strategy of concealment from the very beginning of her story, when she announces a double death and then immediately covers up the news with a brilliantly banal description of the deceased (137). Suppression of the absurd and the abominable ensures their very presence; aberrant behaviour is, in some

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[29] My thanks go out to Roxanne Rimstead for her discussion and clarity of view on Roy's most well-known novel.

strange and alarming way, consequently the norm. The deviant is portrayed as something that is merely kept in check, covered-up by idle chatter and repetition; but its potential to emerge is always present. That space of potential, of possibility, becomes an operation of the grotesque, attracting and repulsing readers, and sets this story apart from the lack of hiddenness in Roy's novel.

Even when abnormal behaviour rears its monstrous head in "Fits," in what seems to be a lapse into total absurdity, there is always an evocation of an antithetical element to ensure that binary opposition is kept in a permanent state of tension. Characters like Robert and the townspeople are ambivalent: they harbour within them co-existing, contradictory emotions and attitudes, though they shield many of these from themselves and others in their daily interactions. A replay of Robert's past, for example, involves a vicious exchange with a former lover, Lee. The two hurl insults at each other, and then:

> they started to laugh themselves, Robert and Lee, but it was not the laughter of a breakthrough into reconciliation . . . They laughed in recognition of their extremity . . . They trembled with murderous pleasure, with the excitement of saying what could never be retracted, they exulted in wounds inflicted but also in wounds received . . .
>
> It wasn't so far from laughing to making love, which they did, all with no retraction. Robert made barking noises, as a dog should, and nuzzled Lee in a bruising way, snapping with real appetite at her flesh. (166-67)

In the context of what is happening in the short story, that a whole town has erupted over the murder-suicide, Robert's and Lee's "argument split open" (166) is a mini-event

within a larger one. They reflect each other perfectly in that they are about people in whom sympathy and loathing co-exist, and point to the shocking, unnerving suggestion that the scale could tip for anyone at any moment. Robert's ability to push his relationship to the extreme is no different from that of the townspeople, who drive up and down the street in front of the house where the deaths of the Weebles have taken place:

> Inside those cars were just the same people, probably the very same people he [Robert] had been talking to during the afternoon. But now they seemed joined to their cars, making some new kind of monster that came poking around in a brutally curious way. (165)

The deformations that Robert, Lee, the townspeople in their cars, the Weebles, and especially, Peg, undergo in Munro's short story are part of a process of uncovering in which Munro, paradoxically, triggers a loss of what readers can grasp--a loss of familiarity, a loss of structure in the disorder of Gilmore.

The freak occurrences of Gilmore, Munro's epidemic of perversion that includes the townspeople-cum-monsters in their cars, involve *readers* in a response to the grotesque well documented by Harpham, Kayser, Thomson, and Williams. As Williams writes: "Loss of [logical] form entails two contrary attitudes: attraction and repulsion. On the one hand, disorder and formlessness deprive the mind of a habitual structure necessary for understanding and acting and ultimately, for being. On the other, disorder frees the mind in certain circumstances from the restrictions of order and reason" (77). Munro's disorder leaves readers without a handrail with which to steady themselves. Not only is there no accounting for the fits of violence and loss of form the characters go

through, there is absolutely no reassurance that it will stop or resolve itself. But the continual, unresolved covering and uncovering of perverse or shocking behaviour perpetuates the cycle of attraction and repulsion in readers who are obliged to search for insight outside the realm of reason.[30]

Loss of form, prevalent in Munro's "Fits," is a central concern in Gabrielle Roy's *The Cashier*. Roy's novel, about a lonely and alienated Montreal bank teller who becomes terminally ill, treats the diseased body and a perceived hostile environment as sites where form and reason no longer comply with personal desire. "Where, then, and how," the anguished cry of Alexandre echoes, "had life ever begun to be so amazingly deformed?" (265). Similar to Munro's townspeople, Alexandre's medical condition means that "What is ordinarily inside now comes out, not only threatening the concretion of the body but also resulting in an ominous seepage of matter of physical, personal, moral, and social significance" (Waskul and van der Riet 487). Yet, while features of ambivalence (in Alexandre's simultaneous desire for and rejection of his bank teller "cage") and ambiguity (his inability to determine, for example, whether the solitude he seeks is good or evil [147]) serve to develop the abjection that breaks apart Alexandre's life, loss of form is less sustained than it is in Munro's short story.

Alexandre leaves his familiar bank cage for a vacation at Lac Vert in Quebec, sick from the indifference of the city and from a cancer as yet unknown to him. Familiar

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[30] The words "pervert," "freak," and "deviation," which all have in their meaning the sense of a "turn," point to Munro's strategy of bringing things to light, in which she simultaneously attracts the reader's attention to, and diverts it from, information and to Williams's discussion of the term "monster," to "'show forth' (*monstrare*, as distinguished from [*re*]*praesentare*)" (4).

shapes turn unfamiliar as Alexandre becomes more and more alienated in his environment:

> Suddenly the light faded. And already Alexandre was in another world. The edges of the lake had lost definition and were confused with the shadow of great fallen trees. These vast masses of shadow suggested grotesque and bewildering forms to Alexandre's imagination. He thought he could make out a mammoth bear, rearing on its hind legs and advancing toward him with a great knotted stick in its paw. He walked toward the monster, forced himself to touch it, and it turned into a huge gnarled tree with a hanging branch. (146)

Roy alleviates the readers' confusion both by revealing the "truth" of the monstrous form, and by attributing Alexandre's illusion to solitude, the creature that has "seduced" and "deceived" him (146).

In a strikingly similar scene in Munro's story, Robert heads out on a solitary walk across the snow and fields. He reflects on his awful day, upset at his wife's misfortune to have discovered the deaths next door. Mostly, however, Robert is upset at the *one, significant detail* that his wife has left out of her story about finding the neighbours' remains. While readers know of the existence of an omitted detail, readers do not know what it *is* that has been left out of Peg's story until the end (and I won't spoil it here). Troubled by thoughts of recent events and his wife's conspicuous omission, Robert strikes out on that fateful winter evening. He sees a group of wrecked and abandoned cars in the fading light, but fails to identify them as such right away. Instead, he views:

> a new kind of glitter under the trees. A congestion of shapes, with black holes in them, and unmatched arms. . . . They did not look like anything, except perhaps a bit like armed giants half collapsed, frozen in combat, or like the jumbled towers of a crazy small-scale city. . . . He kept waiting for an explanation, and not getting one, until he got very close. He was so close he could almost have touched one of these monstrosities before he saw that they were just old cars. (170)

Like Alexandre, Robert sees shapes unrecognizable and deformed to his eye. But although these forms do return to their normal "state," the cars do not turn into harmless objects, as with Alexandre's trees. They remain deformed, violent shapes "tipped over one another at odd angles. The black holes were their gutted insides. Twisted bits of chrome, fragments of headlights, were glittering" (171). We are immediately reminded of the neighbours turned monstrous in their cars passing over and over again in front of the crime scene; we are also reminded of the "guts" and "fragments" of that very act of brutality. On top of this, Munro dedicates the final two paragraphs of the story to the horrific detail that so troubled Robert. And that is where we, as readers, are left at the conclusion of "Fits."

In contrast, in *The Cashier*, ambiguity remains a conceit, but it is tempered. The narrator intervenes to minimize the distressing effects of the unknown upon readers--to speak and fill the absences that surround the mysteries of death and illness. Of course, the questions Roy places before us that relate to Alexandre's anguish are unanswerable, hence the possibility that readers will feel discomfort when faced with

Alexandre's physical degeneration. The closer Alexandre approaches death, for example, the more he becomes aware that, paradoxically, he *needs* his health "to perform an act of absolute sincerity" and face with dignity his own demise (255). Yet, the narrator draws connections that would have otherwise--if left unsaid--served to have destabilized readers even more if they had been left to understand the meaning of a passage independently.

Therefore, when Alexandre reproaches his friend Godias for not having visited him in the hospital earlier, the narrator takes pains to control ambiguity by revealing the underlying meaning of their exchange, and to express what is not said by the characters themselves:

> And Godias, who had come to see his friend several times, whom his friend had readily recognized just the day before, Godias Doucet--instead of saying something which might lead Alexandre to perceive that he was losing his memory--took the undeserved reproof in his stride, accepting the blame with a slightly awkward smile. (256)

Indeed, the narrator does not rely on the power of suggestion or obscurity to trouble readers through a strategy of hiddenness. In other words, apart from the injustice of disease, there is no feature of the unknown to generate apprehension in readers; their imagination is not left to run a wild course of speculation in what concerns Alexandre's decline as it is made explicit. "He no longer always knew, when he awakened, exactly where he was, or even less, the identity of all these people who seemed to be smiling at him" (256).

At the conclusion of the novel, despite a horrible passage of pain and disease through which Alexandre passes and which ensures, as stated earlier, the continuing presence of ambiguity, the narrator's words function to reassure readers. Nevertheless, Alexandre dies feeling that his life on earth is of significance; with his death comes a "tenderness for human beings which goes furthest beyond the bounds of reason" (276). Like the trees, so frightening in one moment, yet harmless in the next, deformity in *The Cashier* is neither absolute nor permanent. Rather, loss of form undergoes a positive transformation or dissipates, to an extent, when the narrator uncovers some authoritative truth, such as: "the good sense, the perfect dignity of death" (264). In "La représentation du corps dans *Alexandre Chenevert*,"[31] Marie-Pierre Andron writes that even though Alexandre's torments cannot be reduced to a mere symbol of the suffering human body, Roy's ending stands as a message of hope, solidarity and--most offensive to the grotesque aesthetic--reconciliation:

> . . . Alexandre Chenevert est la part de nous-mêmes qui échappe au calcul et à la raison humaine. S'il y a une leçon à tirer d'Alexandre Chenevert, c'est peut-être la suivante: il faut troquer la beauté et l'idéal du corps contre la vérité, le rétablissement du dialogue avec soi et les autres. La connaissance du langage de son corps, la solidarité des corps humains entre eux peuvent nous faire retrouver le lien si ténu de la solidarité humaine, chère à Gabrielle Roy. (135)

[31] *Alexandre Chenevert* is the original French title of *The Cashier*. Only English translations were used here for citations of Roy's work.

Similarly, Yolande Roy-Cyr and Claude della Zazzera sense Roy's empathy for her protagonist (109) which becomes evident, they write, in the positive evolution Alexandre undergoes on his death bed, where "se tissent enfin ensemble les fibres de son être" (121).[32] While I believe that the shocking quality of Alexandre's torments does not entirely disappear with the insight he and his companions gain in the hospital, Roy's text displays, nevertheless, a resistance to the ambiguous--that is, to that which can't be classified, and a tendency toward closure. For whether it be in the hospital, where "L'intégrité du moi est atteinte" (Roy-Cyr 121), or there where "God reigned in his most ambiguous aspect" (*The Cashier* 147), at Lac Vert, where to Alexandre "solitude spoke the consoling language of indifference. The trees bent over, told Alexandre that they lived for a time, died, were replaced and that this was all for the good (*The Cashier* 148)," Roy's significant connections prevent the operation of the grotesque aesthetic.

Unnatural death occurs in Roy's *Enchanted Summer*, in a chapter that the author begins, much like Munro's story, with the unexpected and seemingly out of place announcement of death. Only in Roy's novel, it is the death of a child:

> Why then, did the memory of that dead child seek me out in the very midst of the summer that sang? When till then no intimation of sorrow had come to me through the dazzling revelations of that season. (111)

This chapter, entitled "The Dead Child," is the third last of nineteen vignette-like segments that describe a summer stay of the narrator and her husband in the Quebec

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[32] Roy-Cyr and della Zazzera argue that the "favourable" effect of the drugs, under which Alexandre lives out his final days, is merely another essential part of the psychological process Alexandre goes through to achieve the most successful therapy possible. Roy "nous donne l'impression que celles-ci [the drugs] sont aussi le résultat du long cheminement psychologique de son personnage" (119).

countryside. Although the novel is full of encounters between the female narrator and nature, in which she observes the struggle for survival and the harsh, unforgiving lessons of life, "The Dead Child" is a startling episode in the novel and, as François Ricard aptly points out, stands as "one of the most striking in all of Gabrielle Roy's works . . ." (110).

From her idyllic vacation spot, the adult narrator recounts an event in her youth when she began her teaching career in a temporary post in a remote area of Manitoba. Arriving at the school on the first day of her appointment, she discovers that a pupil, Yolande Chartrand, has died the night before of tuberculosis. Following her instincts as to what she feels is appropriate behaviour, the teacher takes the class to visit the deceased little girl, whereupon they set up a vigil until the funeral can take place. In the meantime, they cover their classmate with rose petals. Readers suddenly find themselves in a surreal setting: a lonesome, tiny cabin wherein the little girl is laid out and the parents curiously absent from the scene. Flies, attracted by "the faint odour of death," crawl on the body until the teacher positions herself so as to prevent their repulsive explorations (114).

The ambiance of Roy's text turns with a disturbing memory that interrupts a vacationer's quiet contemplation, and the death of a young girl amid a novel "filled with light and innocence, in which frogs talk, trees sing, animals and humans fraternize . . ." (Ricard 432). With the presence of parasites, and the destabilizing position of the young and inexperienced school teacher who finds herself in a dreadfully serious situation with her impressionable students, Roy's novel verges on the grotesque aesthetic. Yet, I

would argue that Roy enacts what could be called a fascinating "veering away from" the grotesque even in this chapter.

Despite the discrepancy between a child and the signs of death embodied by the flies, where is to be found a loss of order and logic that would send readers into the realm of the irrational? Transformed in death, the girl has indeed undergone a loss of form, yet readers arrive only *after* the transformation, and after the few final lines of the section preceding "The Dead Child," have warned readers of the brevity of life which none of us may escape (108-09). Thus, readers only encounter Yolande once they cannot become entrapped in a conflict of what was as opposed to what is. We do not, for example, witness Yolande resisting death, or losing her sense of self in an abject body. When the teacher encourages the children to tell her (and thus readers) about what the little girl was like in life, the information serves to open "the poor little doors deep within" the students, and help them to accept their loss, "in their eyes the memory of a pleasant image" (116). In Munro's "Fits," readers arrive after the death of the Weebles, yet the effects of the horror of their death continue to snowball, marking the murder-suicide as the beginning of escalating absurd behaviour. Roy, on the contrary, attempts to suppress the spread of grief and confusion, setting up a series of events that demonstrate a rejection of the grotesque aesthetic.

Tuberculosis, a common and indiscriminate killer, is named as the cause of the loss to the community; the little girl is presented as its passive victim. Although Yolande's death may generate shock waves of violence upon the community that has to deal with it, the teacher's role is to contain the negative effects of the disease upon the

survivors as best she can. The consequences of her efforts are revealed through the psychological stages of the children, described in detail by the narrator: "I now understood that the expression in their eyes that I had taken for indifference was a heavy sadness" (113); and later: "they now felt a trust so complete in me it terrified me" (115). The "bitter sadness of the morning" dissipates with the unofficial ceremony of the roses (117); even the expression of the deceased child is translated into terms readers may understand: "In death the child looked as if she were regretting some poor little joy she had never known" (115). The engagement in ceremony accompanied by the steadiness of the narrator's train of thought provides a logical structure for readers--even in the face of an untimely death--and effectively drives away the aesthetic of unfamiliarity.

Decency drives the school teacher in "The Dead Child"; readers remain in her capable hands. In "Fits," although Robert initially appears to offer a voice of reason to readers, his grotesque dispute with Lee (in which he belittles her before acting like a dog in heat) and his sudden overlooking of his disturbing wife's behaviour, serve to undermine readers' understanding of Robert. He stands as no-one's salvation.

However, the ending of Roy's short chapter, "The Dead Child," is not a complete turning away from the grotesque. Now that it is years later, the teacher, pondering on the far away past, wonders whether it is the scent of roses that has provoked a sense of repulsion and, with it, the memory of that sad event (117). Something in this involuntary reaction, triggered by a smell, reveals that something remains hidden from the teacher's, and thus from readers', comprehension. The mysteriousness and inevitability of the laws

of nature--life and death--are not entirely accepted by the narrator after all, for her body seems to revolt at "some element" she cannot control, some aspect that goes beyond reason, beyond even the acceptation that we cannot understand everything. As well, the narrator's memory at the very end of this chapter represents a displacement of what strongly verges on the grotesque (the narrator's sense of confusion and distaste evoked by the smell of roses) from the actual "grotesque image" itself (the dead child described earlier in the narration). This displacement functions, as it does in Munro's story, to renew a disturbing atmosphere. The narrator's memory of her experience in Manitoba is troubling enough to her that it transcends the decades; for readers, the real polar opposition becomes evident not in the combination of the flies and a young child, but in the irreconcilability of the presence of that image in relation to the passing of time (which is supposed to heal all wounds, after all), the idyllic backdrop of a mature woman's country retreat, and the smell of flowers which normally--and especially to this narrator who enjoys her garden--brings a sense of harmony. Therefore, while the arguments I have discussed point to the non-grotesque features of this chapter and the devices employed by Roy, there is a quality to this chapter that strongly points to an uncompleted veering away from the grotesque.

The absence, in Munro's story, of a narrator who attempts to tie things together marks an important difference, I believe, between Munro's "Fits" and the fiction by Roy examined here. Roy's narrators are a comforting companion to readers for the most part--an obstacle to the grotesque aesthetic, really, that comes between and creates distance from a distressing fictional situation and the audience of that fiction. Ultimately,

the diverse roles of the narrators point to the most significant difference between the strategies of these two writers: Roy does not use the device of hiddenness to cause confusion in her readers and prompt them to try and make sense of the nonsensical. Connections are not left concealed. The narrator in *The Cashier*, for example, shows how deformity belongs to the human condition, God's mysterious plan, and so on. Not all the answers are given, of course, but Roy tends to tell us that the *lack* of answers is to be *expected*--it belongs to the larger scheme of things, and therefore stands as a different dynamic than that of Munro's where conflict's source, cause, and connections remain perpetually hidden to readers. Munro's reliance on the strategy of hiddenness results in the antithesis of suppression: the evocation of phenomenon not explicitly voiced in words.

According to Williams, *via negativa* allows one, through denial, to "transcend" the representation of a subject in words. Thus, something that is normally indescribable, or whose wholeness is reduced by affirmative statements, becomes approachable through negation (Williams 32-33). Denial and negation permit an approach to qualities of Roy's writing, such as elements of the abject and the monstrous that begin to appear in the author's work but whose full coming-into-being is resisted by Roy's impulse to divulge meaning and draw connections between them. Roy's fiction "is-not" sustained ambivalence; it "is-not" representative of the suppressed. Munro's "Fits," in contrast, constitutes both hiddenness and--when the author's strategy of hiddenness "shows forth" something--the negation of hiddenness, in a realm wherein paradox and ambivalence thrive.

Binary opposition and the grotesque

The discussion of *via negativa* serves several purposes. Studies on the grotesque typically begin with a statement about the difficulty theorists face in defining the grotesque aesthetic (Cassuto 114, Corey 32, Greene 7, Griffiths 14, McElroy ix, Northey 7); my use of the concept of *via negativa* avoids the pitfalls and redundancy found elsewhere. *Via negativa* also shows the importance of the positive and the negative (as well as a simultaneous consideration of both) in our understanding of certain concepts, and indeed our understanding of the *difficulty of representation* of certain concepts in language, as well as the perceived limits of human understanding. Similarly, I have stated that contradiction, ambivalence, and paradox, all "major players" in the structure of the grotesque, designate (as does *via negativa*) the "double" shape of the grotesque aesthetic, that is, the polar opposition that is the foundation of its structure. The grotesque relies on paradox and other binary forms and tropes, such as the concept of hiddenness (embodied as reveal/conceal), to work its effect on readers.

Russo's discussion of the grotesque defines a feminist form of the aesthetic. The concept of the "female grotesque" developed by Russo has gained rapid popularity in theoretical practice but has not been challenged despite its questionable application of gender politics to the grotesque. The following brief survey of feminism, and of what is termed the female grotesque, outlines the role and meaning of binary opposition in the theoretical conflation of grotesque and female. My aim in including the historical background of binary opposition in feminist theory is to dispute the ways in which feminist theory relies on gender to articulate the grotesque. This overview points to the ways in which different feminist critics sought a language "of their own," a way to

theorize female sexuality, experience, writing, and ways of reading that are understood in relation to their distinct status from the masculine. Since, in the fiction I examine, the monstrous rather than the "male" is the polar opposite of the subject, and since neither side of the dichotomy subject/monster signifies superiority or inferiority, gender becomes "inadequate"--or misplaced, at the least--as a basis of analysis for the grotesque.

Feminist theory is, along with critical study of the grotesque, the central literary theory of this study because the fiction I examine presents ontological and epistemological questions about the representation of women. What does the duality woman/monster show about the being of fictional characters? How does duality permit or obstruct readers from gaining knowledge about literary subjects? To consider these questions is to partake in a feminist practice because it involves exploring how authors construct female subjects in fiction, and how literary theory articulates this process. Linda Hutcheon writes:

> Subjectivity in the Western liberal humanist tradition has been defined in terms of rationality, individuality, and power; in other words, it is defined in terms of those domains traditionally denied women, who are relegated instead to the realms of intuition, familial collectivity, and submission. I exaggerate only slightly in my rhetoric here, for the last ten years of feminist research have argued most convincingly for the historical existence of these two differently en-gendered modes of subjectivity. (5)

However, what readers learn about the representation of women in grotesque fiction does not arise exclusively from a consideration of gender. On the contrary, the strategy

of the grotesque--and its relationship to feminist theory--refigures binary opposition, a traditionally faulty system for the representation of women. Nevertheless, feminist theory continues to adopt and adhere to the very system of binarism that the grotesque strategy circumvents.

The "discourse on monsters," as Rosa Braidotti phrases it, is important to feminist theory in that feminist criticism on the grotesque aesthetic and on binary opposition leads to the question of "the status of difference within rational thought" (Braidotti 62). A general consensus on the definition of a "norm" means that we understand whatever may lie outside of a norm (the monster, for example, and arguably, women, as we shall see) through difference: the norm in relation to the non-normal. When difference is used as such to understand identity, however, the latter term (the non-normal) is traditionally regarded as inferior to its opposite. The question Braidotti poses in relation to rational thinking (and we may remind ourselves that the grotesque gives us ample room to pose this question, since the grotesque is, according to Harpham, a "confusion in language categories" [*xxi*]) is "Can we learn to think differently about difference?" (62).

The traditional structure of binary opposition in language has played a large role in feminist criticism, the critical theory that has led to the proposal of the grotesque as a feminine literary and artistic form. Binary opposition has been rejected or resisted by many feminists because it is viewed as a foundational system of rational thought within male institutions that functions to perpetuate the oppression of women and minority groups. Diane Price Herndl, pointing to Shoshana Felman's work, "Women and Madness," writes that Western "discourse is one that works by opposition: in such a

system of thought (a phallogocentric, male-dominated system), woman is placed in the inferior position: Man/Woman" (10). Feminism challenges Western literature, religion, and philosophy that has relied on the system of binary opposition to define and distinguish concepts:

> Thus, the metaphysical logic of dichotomous oppositions which dominates philosophical thought (Presence/Absence, Being/Nothingness, Truth/Error, Same/Other, Identity/Difference, etc.) is, in fact, a subtle mechanism of hierarchization which assures the unique valorization of the "positive" pole (that is, of a single term) and, consequently, the repressive subordination of all "negativity," the master of difference as such. . . .Theoretically subordinated to the concept of masculinity, the woman is viewed by the man as his opposite, that is to say, as his other, the negative of the positive, and not, in her own right, different, other, Otherness itself. (Felman 8)

In its method of differentiation, the system of binary opposition privileges one term over its polar opposite; male is thus positioned as superior to female, the self (a male protagonist, for example) is elevated over the other (a minor female character whose identity is defined only in relation to her male counterpart). Feminist critics pointed out, for example, in literature authored by men, how female characters were mere tools (the "other") that served to fill out or complement the primary roles held by male characters. As Hanan A. Muzaffar writes, relying on Hélène Cixous and Toril Moi: "One of the main ideas that unites most feminists is their refusal to acknowledge that system which justifies their oppression on the ground of their being linked to the non-human, the

mythical, the mad, or the silent," in other words, the polar opposite of the male that a patriarchal system maintains as the norm, the sane, and of equal importance: the entity with a voice (3).

Feminist critics not only pointed to a lack of fictional female characters women could identify with in one way or another, or who held an important position in a canon of texts full of active male protagonists, but to the fact that the body of literature held in high regard in Western culture (and analysed through masculine models of interpretation) was written by men and focused on masculine interests. Feminist critics thus approached the lack of a female voice in literature in different ways and with different objectives. Hélène Cixous begins her article "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays" with the following "poem" to demonstrate not only what she views as the subjugation of women in a historically male-dominated hierarchy, but to question how women can speak for themselves from the margins, a position to which they have been relegated:

Where is she?

Activity/passivity

Sun/Moon

Culture/Nature

Day/Night

Father/Mother

Head/Heart

Intelligible/palpable

Logos/Pathos

. . . . . .

Man

Woman

"Always the same metaphor . . ." Cixous writes. "If we read or speak, the same thread or double braid is leading us throughout literature, philosophy, criticism, centuries of representation and reflection" (101). In the now famous 1977 article, "This Sex Which is Not One," for example, Luce Irigaray looks at how women's sexuality has, through the model of binary opposition, been defined through male sexuality, the "dominant phallic economy" in which "woman's erogenous zones never amount to anything but . . . a non-sex, or a masculine organ turned back upon itself . . ." (363). Well-known French feminism (as practised by Irigaray, Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Monique Wittig), as Ann Rosalind Jones summarizes, sought to investigate the way in which the subjugation of women in language and culture could be resisted through women's own definition of female sexuality (*jouissance*), and women's subjectivity defined and redefined through the female body (370-71). American feminists Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar look at the "vexing polarities of angel and monster" in the representations of women in literature, and ask--as so many feminist critics have since--how these figures in literary history affect the ways in which female authors write (21). These approaches, all of which touch on the construction of female identity in relation to binary opposition, point to a major concern for feminists: "how the female subject inscribes herself in writing" (Belsey and Moore 15).

Alongside a focus on women as writers writing about, among other things, women, feminism also began a system of analysis in which critics such as Mary Jacobus examined women not as writers, but as readers. The question then became how women are constructed through language, or created through the fiction of literature and how, then, as readers we "read" women (Belsey and Moore 15). Belsey and Moore survey feminist resistance to binary opposition and the way in which the language and structures of polar opposition reinforce the very hierarchical order feminists denounce: "Language," Belsey and Moore observe in criticism by Dale Spender, "does not merely name male superiority, it produces it"; in other words, we perceive the world through the language we use to name and categorize it and not according to some inherent "pre-existing reality" (4). Words are thus capable of naming and upholding one version of "reality" over another, depending on who does the naming. "Universal truths" about men, about women, became the target of criticism[33] that pointed to the sources of such laws, and their ideological and cultural agendas.

Early feminist criticism, therefore, can be divided into two general modes, and aims: the deconstruction of male literary institutions (through, for example, the study of literature written by men); and the retrieval, examination, and legitimization of women's writing, including writing as a form of resistance (Belsey and Moore 9; Spender 23). An important aspect of feminism for at least the last forty years has been the way in which:

> Feminist thinking is really rethinking, an examination of the way certain assumptions about women and the female character enter into the

[33] The period of this criticism ranges from the 1970s on, as outlined by Belsey and Moore.

> fundamental assumptions that organize all our thinking. For instance, assumptions such as the one that makes intuition and reason opposite terms parallel to female and male may have axiomatic force in our culture, but they are precisely what feminists need to question . . . (Jehlen 191)

Feminist literary theory that enacts an examination and break-down of the assumptions Myra Jehlen reveals lie behind the system of binary thinking, strives to multiply and enlarge the ways in which women as subjects are read.

Subjectivity, writes Rita Felski, is of "key status . . . to second-wave feminism, in which the notion of female experience, whatever its theoretical limitations, has been a guiding one" (14). Feminists[34] interested in the concept that language becomes an unstable site where meaning, and especially subjectivity, are no longer tenable, "a terrain on which the sexual opposition man/woman is undone . . ." (Belsey and Moore 19) appropriated theories of post-structuralism. Rita Felski demonstrates how Kristeva, for example, uses post-structuralist theory to uphold the text as "a privileged site of resistance" and a "locus of indeterminacy which undermines fixed meanings and authoritarian ideological positions"; that is, the very "tradition that has sought to control meanings and repress difference" (4-5). Post-structuralist theory views literary criticism as a means of opposing traditional ways of thinking, understanding, and representing entities, and equally importantly, as a strategy with which critics could undermine the ways of perceiving the human subject in literature.

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[34] Belsey and Moore examine Alice Jardine and Julia Kristeva here (19).

Authors, narrators, and literary characters in post-structuralism are no longer considered as stable identities whose meanings and intentions are present within the text, available in some way for readers or critics to grasp. Instead, language is viewed as something containing multiple, unfixed meanings that are not the product of a single vision controlled by an author. The author, in post-structuralism--like the characters in a novel--is also a product of language, and not the person who determines its meaning. Post-structuralist feminists regard the text as a site of language wherein meanings are open to interpretation (not fixed) and the subject within the text (the identity of a character, for example, or an author) a construction of language--such as a social construction--that can be read in different ways. Post-structuralist feminists could then take apart "masculine ideology" by showing, for example, that the subject in literature is often a product of a dominant ideology (and that non-dominant voices are not represented through the human subjects in literature). Similarly, feminists could subvert the very patriarchal language generating images of women and their experiences that upheld, through binary opposition, the values and belief systems of certain socio-political groups. As Belsey and Moore point out, post-structuralist feminists accomplished this by using the ambiguities and contradictions found within texts to their advantage (11).

Literature is generally viewed by feminists as a powerful tool that shapes society and therefore makes imperative the representation of a more broad spectrum of society's voices:

> Literature . . . can profoundly influence individual and cultural self-understanding in the sphere of everyday life, charting the changing

> preoccupations of social groups through symbolic functions by means of which they make sense of experience. This social function of literature in relation to a broad-based women's movement is necessarily important to an emancipatory feminist politics, which has sought to give cultural prominence to the depiction of women's experiences and interests. (Felski 7)

Feminist criticism, then, developed various strategies and theories on how women could both read and represent a multiplicity of voices in literature distinct from patriarchal biases. French feminists Cixous and Irigaray developed what they viewed as a language for women, written by women, and intended to represent women (*écriture féminine* in Cixous's theory, "womanspeak" in Iragaray's). The female gothic, according to Ellen Moers's analysis, is a literary mode through which critics may constitute a powerful "female" language through a specifically female form of writing. This "female mode" focuses on issues of particular pertinence to women, it is argued, and is written through the perspective of a woman. For example, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Moers writes, "seems to be distinctly a *woman's* mythmaking on the subject of birth . . ." (93), and a disturbing blend of polar opposites: "the struggle of a creator with monstrous creation" (92). Novels such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Frankenstein* do not just belong to a female literary tradition, therefore--one embodying perverse and eccentric female experience (100-01)--but also, according to Moers, a framework (the female gothic) that enables the critic to connect one work to another under the same category.

What all these feminist approaches share, however, is their stress on the difference between women and men in writing and criticism of literature. As Donna

Bennett wrote, in 1986, many Canadian feminist critics, for example, "have tended to define women's writing in dialectical terms: women are not what men have defined them to be, they are the opposite. But this new definition of women accepts another opposition, women are foremost, not men" (233). Equally, feminist post-structuralist theories have received criticism for their limitations: Belsey and Moore point to Cixous's and Irigaray's failure to relate their challenge of binary opposition to history and culture, and failure to acknowledge a diversity of groups of women (14-15); Felski contends that there is nothing in experimental writing, such as in *écriture féminine*, that is inherently feminist, and that other forms of writing (such as social realism) are left by the wayside in view of the theories of French feminism on avant-garde writing (4-6). Much of feminist criticism continues to pit female against male institutions (a point I will return to in detail), perpetuating, in a sense, the very system of binary logic that I show is bypassed by the grotesque. Braidotti, in "Mothers, Monsters, and Machines," for example, writes that feminism "brings into practice the dimension of sexual difference through the critique of gender as power institution. Feminism is the question; the affirmation of sexual difference is the answer" (61). However, the sign of the monster, as I show with Gowdy's fiction, for example, in chapter two, insists on purifying and essentially confounding readers' customary routes to knowledge. If feminist theory shows that we are accustomed to defining woman in relation to man, the grotesque requires that we erase our perceptions, expectations, and assumptions about subjects and the power struggles that normally define them. As my analysis of Munro's story demonstrated, the grotesque does not privilege the rational over the irrational, but rather functions through the

tensions between both. In contrast, binary opposition--the structure upholding the notion of the "female grotesque"--belongs to rational discourse alone.

What is the female grotesque?

In order to argue that in the literature I examine the grotesque functions to represent female narrators in relation to the monstrous (rather than the male), I outline and subsequently contest the claim in feminist theory that the grotesque is "female." Belsey and Moore consider that in feminism the study of gender relations in fiction is eminent with regard to the representation of women. "The feminist reader," Belsey and Moore summarize, "is enlisted in the process of changing the gender relations which prevail in our society, and she regards the practice of reading as one of the sites in the struggle for change" (1). Reading and analysis become a political act in which "Specific ways of reading inevitably militate for or against the process of change. . . .The feminist reader might ask, among other questions, how the text represents women, what it says about gender relations, how it defines sexual difference" (Belsey 1). And yet, the grotesque becomes, in the Canadian fiction I study, a strategy central to the question of how women are portrayed in fiction despite, I maintain, an absence of play on gender difference.

When my interest in the grotesque began, I looked up Russo's *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1995). How could the grotesque be female? I wondered. Does the term "female grotesque" point to the way women are portrayed grotesquely in art and literature, and/or is it a feminist literary theory that considers that women write against tradition through the grotesque? Russo is still the reigning theorist

of the female grotesque, her groundbreaking text cited in almost any analysis of the grotesque and women in art and literature. Russo places herself in the position of "reader" and asks, "What happens when we look at the grotesque through gender?"

The term "female grotesque," Russo writes, "threatens to become a tautology since the female is always defined against the male norm" (12). For Russo, female grotesques are "female performers who are, one way or another, in error. Each of the agents is marked by specificities of age, body shape, class, ethnicity, and sexuality . . ." (13). The artist, Russo claims for example, who makes of herself a "spectacle" of excess and abjection, undermines the power of normalization in her deviation from norms of femininity. "The female spectacle," she writes, "which emerges as a de-formation of the normal suggests new political aggregates--provisional, uncomfortable, even conflictual coalitions of bodies which both respect the concept of situated knowledges and refuse to keep every body in its place" (16). Russo's schema first posits the grotesque as female (the grotesque becomes gendered, in other words, defined by its difference with the male). She then inverts the hierarchy of normal over its opposite by defining the characteristics of the female grotesque--risk and heterogeneity--in positive terms in their "powerful" potential as a tool of political transformation. As a feminist reader of the grotesque, Russo asks the question: "how the text invites its readers, as members of a specific culture, to understand what it means to be a woman or man, and so encourage them to reaffirm or challenge existing cultural norms" (1).

Feminists have often sought to invert the "patriarchal hierarchy" by placing women in a privileged position *over* men, and thus as "foremost."[35] Russo objects to the term "normal" altogether but she employs and positions the term, nevertheless, in a binary opposite to lend meaning to her category of female grotesque:

> Feminism in the 1990s has stood increasingly for and with the normal. I mean this in two senses. It is identified with the norm as a prescription of correct, conventional or moralizing behaviour or identity, and with the normal as it is commonly misapprehended as the familiar. (vi-vii)

Feminism from this period, she argues, desires to appear normal, mainstream, and acceptable. What Russo does is to invert the scheme of the grotesque. Instead of attempting to place the female as the "norm" (that is, the "other" of the male, its negative) she privileges instead its antithesis: the deformation and transgression of the normal. The sign of the freak, the abject, and the abnormal, in Russo's theory, therefore, become categories that can be positively appropriated by feminist artists and critics.

More precisely, the female body, Russo argues, evokes the grotesque through the term's association with the cavernous and is indeed associated metaphorically--and often in a misogynist manner--with female bodily abjection, thus all the elements of "blood, tears, vomit and excrement" that are "down there in that cave of abjection" (1-2). Russo examines Amelia Earhart as a "stunter," for instance--a woman who performs dangerous stunts and, as such, a figure who exceeds gender boundaries through her boyishness and activeness. Earhart is viewed as ambivalent and transgressive and thus

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[35] See Bennett's statement, cited earlier.

a grotesque performer: "tall, slim and aerodynamic like the planes beside which she modelled." Earhart stood for all the "liberatory aspirations for individual women in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s" (25). Similarly, for Russo, examples of contemporary Fat Woman performers--fatness being one of the "categories of abjection which have historically been related to the grotesque"--show how feminist artists use the excess of their bodies to perform political commentaries on pornography (Russo 24). Although I do not view the grotesque as "low" or "high" art, with these examples Russo enacts what she believes is a re-positioning of the aesthetic and its female artists to the locality of high.

This altered hierarchical arrangement situates feminism as the "ordinary" rather than the "norm"; Russo defines ordinary feminism as "heterogeneous, strange . . . ragged, conflictual, incomplete, in motion, and at risk" (*vii*), deflating the concept of the normal to "nothing more or less than the prevailing standard" (*vii*). The re-localization of feminism in this manner resists the "normalizing strategy" of feminism that Russo claims has become class-oriented, resulting in the exclusion of some groups of women, and feeding into societal pressures for women to conform and to--as the critic has so famously put it--"not make a spectacle of oneself" (12).

Russo, therefore, makes the distinction between feminist criticism, which aims to position women on the side of the "normal," and feminist grotesque theory, which leans to placing women on "the side of the freak and the uncanny" (12). Either position, in relation to fiction of the grotesque, essentially defines "normal" and "not-normal" in terms of "male" and "female" respectively. Looking at Foucault, Russo describes normalization

as a politically powerful instrument meant, on the one hand, to keep different groups in their place (10); on the other hand, "a de-formation of the normal" through female spectacle involves risk, error, the power to unsettle, and the possibility of political change (16). In this way, the female grotesque becomes (in literary theory) a female aesthetic. Even Bakhtin's carnival,[36] Russo and Katherine Weese argue, does not provide the necessary social and artistic freedom for women to voice themselves, since women "are oppressed by the carnival's entirely conventional patriarchal practices"[37] (Weese 349). Moreover, women writers, claim Weese and Deirdre Lashgari, need a space from which they may develop "'feminine' forms of self-display" (Weese 349) and write "honestly," which means "violating the literary boundaries of the expected and the accepted" (Lashgari 2). Thus the need for a female grotesque, these critics argue, to stand for and serve as an alternate form of expression for women writers and the depiction of the female subject in fiction. From such alternate writings, a new female subjectivity "alive, with defamiliarization" may be launched (Cixous, "Laugh" 359).

But there is nothing inherently feminist about creating an aesthetic that destablizes readers through unfamiliarity; more is needed on the part of critics to establish links

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[36] In *Rabelais and his* World, Mikhail Bakhtin studies the grotesque in the work of French Renaissance writer François Rabelais, and focuses on the celebration of mediaeval carnival. "Bakhtin elevated the grotesque by embracing its laughter and the 'low' comic aspect of popular culture. He endowed the comic principle of folk carnival with meaningful philosophical content that expresses utopian ideals of 'community, freedom, equality, and abundance.'" ("Grotesque," *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*, Toronto: Toronto UP, 1993.) McElroy remarks that Bakhtin "locates the grotesque in the spirit of the carnival which distorts and diffuses all that is terrible by the people's triumphant laughter" (2).

[37] Weese refers to the conformity carnival displays "in the area of traditional gender relations" both in Bakhtin's theory and in the carnival setting of the novel she studies by Dunn (351). The theatre of the carnival is, for example, overseen by men: "Women, in contrast, give up both subjectivity and artistry" (349-51). Moreover, Weese argues that Dunn's use of irony sustains binary opposites, such as "a bizarre family" and "wholly conventional nuclear and patriarchal family practices," and thus challenges the idea that carnival is non-conventional in its inversion of polar opposites (352).

between forms of literature (or the grotesque aesthetic) and feminist politics. Furthermore, as Felski pointedly states about the limits of so-called transgressive female aesthetics, and about which I agree: "The defamiliarizing capacity of literary language and form" (and I insert here: such as the grotesque) "does not in itself bear any necessary relationship to the political and social goals of feminism" (6).

Russo's work is a founding block in theory of the feminist grotesque. But in its re-evaluation of the construction of the subject it has not been critically challenged in what I view is an untenable denial of the grotesque: the attachment of order (rank, or hierarchy) to duality, juxtaposition, and contradiction, the principal characteristics of the grotesque. Russo writes, for example, that analysis of the grotesque has enabled her as critic to envision that "the very structure for rethinking the grand abstraction of 'liberation' for women depends upon the flexibility and force of juxtaposition" (13) in work by Ulrike Ottinger (the film *Freaks*) and fiction by Angela Carter. The unresolved tension of juxtaposition as it stands in the grotesque aesthetic, however, becomes deflated in Russo's configuration when the female becomes the centre in a dynamic of sexual difference. Juxtaposition, as I have already stressed in my description of the non-grotesque as opposed to the grotesque, is a structure of tremendous possibility. It has, for example, through its representation of the relationship between two things at once, the potential to map a symbiotic relationship between opposites that readers would otherwise not perceive, and thus open up a level of consciousness through its particular aesthetic. An example, if we think of Saint Augustine's discussion of time, is the fact that we may, through juxtaposition, represent something we neither do nor can know, such

as the future if we present it in terms of the present. "What method," Saint Augustine asks, "can you adopt for teaching what is future, when to you nothing is future at all?" (261). However, a fundamental difference between Russo's position of juxtaposition/opposition and my own is Russo's view that the grotesque is privileged (or not privileged) over its binary opposite. My view is that the grotesque is neither high nor low, but a locus of equal tension between these two poles. The implications of this difference in critical perspective are great in what concerns the construction of a female aesthetic and a feminist reading of that aesthetic.

There is, as I will summarize, an area of feminist theory that shares this notion of a divided, incoherent subject with the grotesque strategy I formulate. This alternate strategy in feminist discourse involves the creation of the monstrous subject through abjection; one mode through which this appears is the female gothic. While distinct from the grotesque aesthetic, the female gothic presents in feminist discourse, nevertheless, a similar strategy to that of the grotesque and the notion of the speaking subject, namely, a resistance to a fixed representation of a subject. In *Gothic Form of Feminine Fictions*, Susanne Becker points out that binary oppositions always involve a power structure "in which the one, privileged, pole positions itself as subject and defines, and devalues, the other as object or Other" (44). In criticism of feminine gothic horror, the polar opposite is sometimes defined as Woman/women, which translates into a relationship between "natural" woman and "the most famous female figure of the gothic tradition: the monstrous-feminine" (Becker 44). Relying on Toril Moi, Becker defines this opposition as man-made--a gendered system in which standards, claimed as "natural,"

are set for femininity and applied to all women. Any deviation from this schema, such as that which appears in gothic fiction, is determined monstrous (Becker on Moi 44).

Yet, Becker finds what she views as an answer to the problem of gothic female subjectivity (namely, the polarization of woman as the negative) in the work of Kristeva: "woman," seen as the symbol of the "negative" or as "absence," creates a position as such wherein there is the possibility for change because the subject is in process (45). The abject places woman in a liminal state: she is neither a subject nor a non-subject (object) when she, by necessity, subdues the abject, as Lauren O'Neill-Butler explains. A person is made up of abject operations or states (and thus the abject is essential), yet if one is to enter into the symbolic (Lacan's stage in which a person acquires language and identity), the abject must be repressed (O'Neill-Butler on Kristeva and Grosz 4). If the abject is present in the depiction of women who transgress "feminine" boundaries, therefore, readers are forced to consider a subject that defies what O'Neill-Butler terms as a "coherent identity" (4). Becker's interest in Kristeva's "'divided subject" is an interest in the subject in literature as one that is not unified, and thus powerful because of its negativity.[38] Like the grotesque strategy I define, there is in this approach to gothic female subjectivity no "fixed image of femininity" (Becker 45-46). The negative female subject, Becker writes, operates her negativity to challenge standards and conditions set by society, possibly leading to change (45-46). Transgression signals, therefore, a female aesthetic at work in the representation of the subject.

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[38] In her introduction to Kristeva's chapter "The System and the Speaking Subject," Toril Moi clearly defines the link between the speaking subject and negativity: to speak is to conform to a system--linguistics--but also to transgress that system because all subjects are heterogeneous when they perform the act of speaking. To speak and thus transgress is termed "negativity" (24).

Becker's conception of Kristeva's split subject is supposed to work to "feminise the gothic romance" as well as to consider the conditions for the emergence of female subjectivity (45-46). Becker's theory relies on post-structuralist/feminist notions of the subject in process, which is a way of repositioning gothic writing as avant-garde and transgressional. Yet, Felski makes a strong argument against the notion that female writing is equivalent to the "avant-garde" and attacks French feminism in particular: "French feminism has continued . . . to lay exclusive emphasis upon a notion of difference, which is typically situated in relation to an avant-garde textual practice" (43). Furthermore, Felski accuses French feminists of placing the feminine into the same negative scheme that critical theory is supposed to strive against:

> On the one hand, both Kristeva and Cixous make statements to the effect that "it is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing," a claim which suggests a laudable openness to the potential of a variety of textual strategies; on the other hand, this statement appears in practice to mean that feminine writing is "that which cannot be defined," in other words the same old equation of the feminine with the negative, mysterious, unknown. (43)

As Lisa Rado aptly points out in "Lost and Found: Remembering Modernism, Rethinking Feminism": "scholars are becoming increasingly divided over whether the political project of equality for women can best be achieved by emphasizing the difference of female experience or attempting to invalidate the notion of gender categories altogether" (7).

The grotesque, as I see it, is not an association of gender to a deviation from the norm, but a combination of both deviation *and* norm, a juxtaposition of opposites. Michael Camille's study of the origins of grotesque art as marginal art or as "gloss" demonstrates that the sign of the grotesque enlarges the meaning of the text it illustrates (such as in illustrated manuscripts, one object of Camille's study of marginal art) through the tension created through juxtaposition (20). The grotesque image, or marginal gloss, "interacts with and reinterprets a text that has come to be seen as fixed and finalized" (20). Just as in the illustrated manuscripts in which the margins interact with the centre-text, the grotesque in literature is a site that plays out between the words on the page and the readers' aesthetic sensibility to the grotesque images written in the text. The novel, or short story, therefore, becomes a site of "disagreement and juxtaposition--what the scholastics called "*disputatio*"--rather than a locus of "flowing linear speech" (Camille 21). Similarly, Williams demonstrates that the combination of the symbols of earth and air in the harpy, griffin, and winged horse, Pegasus, signifies "the transgression of boundaries of earth and air" (197). As monstrous signs, the harpy, griffin, and winged horse transcend the meaning of "earth" and "air" because they represent a combination "but in a deformed mode that points toward their negation and consequent expansion of meaning" (193).

In her brief examination of the evolution of the grotesque in art, Russo determines that the grotesque became marginalized (figuratively speaking) because of the critique of Ruskin, who claimed that the grotesque was not serious art, and because grotesque

figures literally adorn the edges and margins of buildings and paintings (5).[39] The grotesque as marginal ornament in Russo's view suggests the very type of female representation post-structuralist feminists contest in literature, where women are portrayed as mere ornament "to be cruelly observed in intricate detail but never allowed to make words" (6).[40] But the zone of the grotesque is not that of the margins where the absurd figures are drawn, for example, in illuminated manuscripts of the middle ages, but rather that of the tension created by the juxtaposition of the monstrous drawings and the sacred centre from which they are inextricable--liminal areas considered as "zones of transformation" and ambiguousness (Camille 16, 29). It is thus not merely out of curiosity that I attempt to side-step gender in this study of the grotesque in Canadian fiction, but out of the view, based on my analysis of fiction and of theories of the grotesque (including feminist theories), that the grotesque cannot function through a gender-based structure. Arguments that seek the contrary effectuate the collapse of bi-polar opposition.

My argument against the concept of a "female grotesque" as a feminine aesthetic begins within feminism itself. Some feminist theorists express a perceived weakness in the structure of female difference in the very relationship to male institutions with which it is inextricably associated. Felski argues that a feminist aesthetic, "defined as a

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[39] Although in the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*, Ruskin is credited with being the first to evaluate the grotesque as a serious aesthetic (87).

[40] Russo argues that "late Renaissance and baroque combinations of depth and surface models of the body resurface in the twentieth century to produce the spectacular category of female grotesque which Cronenberg and Ottinger name respectively 'mutant woman' and 'freak'" (6).

normative theory of literary or artistic form that can be derived from a feminist politics" is an impossibility (2). She suggests that:

> it is impossible to speak of "masculine" and "feminine" in any meaningful sense in the formal analysis of texts; the political value of literary texts from the stand point of feminism can be determined only by an investigation of their social functions and effects in relation to the interests of women in a particular historical context, and not by attempting to deduce an abstract literary theory of "masculine" and "feminine" "subversive" and "reactionary" forms in isolation from the social conditions of their production and reception. (2)

The concept of "female difference" or that the female can only be understood in relation to the male is itself reliant on patriarchal thinking (Felski 46), and fails to provide feminist politics an alternate ground with which to envision a literary and intellectual structure. In a similar vein, Belsey and Moore observe that since "Language is viewed by implication as a universal structure that oppressed all women in the same way" how are womanspeak and *écriture féminine* supposed to be able to escape the problem of language since they are "theories of language based on sex"? In other words, how are they "able to escape their separatist implications and, correspondingly, provide feminism with a theory of social change"? (14-15 Belsey and Moore). Looking at the grotesque as a non gender-based aesthetic, I believe that the critic may side-step the very oppositional category that Felski argues against (and necessarily so)--that is, binary thinking that privileges "certain ethical and political values and normative assumptions"

(46). The liminal state of the literary grotesque offers a privileged locus in which subjectivity may be constructed through paradox, contradiction, and the dual systems described throughout this study without a dependence upon gender and gender differences.

I have always been troubled by the theory of "female grotesque" since the grotesque aesthetic itself cannot accommodate the male/female dichotomy that many American and French feminisms rely on as their own basic structure. Can there exist a form of feminism without gender? Yes--I believe this analysis of the grotesque bears implications for feminist theory. The grotesque is not a female aesthetic, but it can offer, nevertheless, a strategy for critical thought on "the social meanings and functions of literature in relation to women writers and readers" (Felski 19). My own work branches dramatically from that of Felski's in two respects: this thesis centres on the grotesque aesthetic, and also proposes a literary theoretical model of the middle voice (delineated in chapter two) that not only reinforces what I believe is the basic structure of the grotesque aesthetic, but also helps readers or critics to approach fiction on women and the grotesque without relying on the particular power structure gender embodies in its binary structure. This study as a whole shows how authors create the subjectivity of narrators through paradox rather than sexual difference, and thus how questions of identity do not intrinsically fall to the category of gender.

Felski writes that "Multiplicity, indeterminacy, or negativity are not in themselves specifically feminist" (7). One cannot claim that the grotesque, because it is subversive or transgressive, is feminist without demonstrating that a text addresses an issue

pertinent to feminism in some way. I cannot claim that the middle voice can serve as a feminist model until I first show, in chapter three, how literature to which we may apply this analytical method addresses feminist concerns, and how the middle method can flesh out these feminist arguments.

The power of the grotesque in fiction becomes evident when we look at it through the "logic" of paradox, contradiction, and ambivalence. How are readers made to view the subject (and his/her construction) through negative space as much as positive space, and what are the outcomes and implications of this perspective and aesthetic?

CHAPTER TWO

In chapter one, I established the statement "The grotesque is this and it is the negation of this" as the fundamental structure of the grotesque aesthetic. As one way of exploring this contradiction inherent in the grotesque, I applied the system of *via negativa* to fiction since it both reflects and gives access to the oppositional "state" of the grotesque. I begin here by drawing together the relation of *via negativa* with subjectivity in the grotesque aesthetic by interpreting Barbara Gowdy's grotesque short story "Sylvie," from *We So Seldom Look on Love* (1992). My basic question in this chapter regarding Gowdy's grotesque fiction is how and to what effect does Gowdy portray a subject by confusing the category of identity, or what I refer to as subjectivity?

I will examine several of Gowdy's short stories and one novel to address this question. Gowdy's novel, *Mr. Sandman* (1992) begins with the birth of a baby, Joan Canary, in 1956. From the moment Baby Joan arrives, with a beauty so extraordinary it "inspired adoration even in the blind" (22), she is the object of the Canary family's joy, bewilderment, and fascination. Mute and musically gifted, Joan's otherworldly characteristics blend in with her family's own mix of bizarre characters. Gowdy's short story collection, *We So Seldom Look on Love*, includes stories where characters deviate significantly from the ordinary in terms of social practice or physical traits. In "Sylvie," the main character leads a doubled existence because of a physical deformation, an extra belly and pair of legs from a conjoined sister. "It's like dreaming when you know it's a dream," Sylvie philosophizes. "You've got two lives going on at once" (36). The title story of the collection features a narrator whose passion is necrophilia. In "Flesh of my Flesh,"

the act of telling a story is curiously shaped by violent death and transsexuality, confounding subjectivity for readers. The grotesque predominates in each of these stories of confounded identity.

Since it is through narrative voice--its strategies and effects on readers--that the subject materialises, I examine voice in Gowdy's and other grotesque fiction. Negation, as I will show, is not sufficient to examine the narrative strategies I claim authors employ to confuse depiction of the subject through literary voice. I therefore develop a literary model called the middle voice to approach the question of subjectivity, that is, how the grotesque confounds a narrator's identity. Once I have established an approach to the subject in the narrating act through the middle voice method, I apply it to Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*--a novel that offers a challenging dual narrative and a strong case for what the middle model can achieve--before turning again to Gowdy's grotesque fiction.

I argue that in fiction by Barbara Gowdy and Margaret Atwood women are paradoxical because authors *negate* existing social constructs of the notion of "women." Without this strategy, the wholeness, or the plurality of the concept "women" escapes readers. Negation, or the illustration of the *is-not* of a concept by means of the grotesque, is effective in representing concepts that are paradoxical such as God, or the state of being. God is paradoxical because He is "the One who is source of the many, beyond being yet cause of being . . ." (Williams 4). The women in the fiction I study who are "freaks," for example, negate two types of social constructions of women: first, that woman is "feminine," beautiful, subordinate; and second, that woman is the opposite of

man, a "kind of non-man" (Abrams 89). Woman as freak resists both categories, despite the fact that according to Belinda Edmondson, the binary relation of man/woman "would then subsume everything that is not Man under the category of Woman" (84). Freaks cannot be subsumed as "anything man is not" in part because freaks do not fit into the category of "woman" and thus do not work within the binary organization of man/woman. Woman as freak becomes, rather, the source of both a re-definition and re-examination of "woman" within such established ways of thinking. As Braidotti writes, the advantage of the formulation of connections between women and monsters[41] for feminist epistemologists is "the loss of any essentialized definition of womanhood . . ." (77).

The concept of being in fictional representations of women as subjects is, I believe, also paradoxical (as it is for representations of God) because such subjects cannot be known except by *showing* what is *unknowable* about them.[42] *Via negativa*, as outlined in chapter one, is a system of negation that through the aesthetic of the grotesque can, in my phraseology, "show hiddenness"; it is a paradoxical system for it "shows forth" a concept while simultaneously concealing or denying aspects of it.

Whereas Williams shows that the monster is unrecognizable in terms of any association with God, I believe that negation shows us that in the grotesque there is

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[41] Braidotti defines monsters as: "a third kind of discourse: the history and philosophy of the biological sciences, and their relation to difference and to different bodies. Monsters are human beings who are born with congenital malformations of their bodily organisms" (61-62).

[42] Williams writes that the function of negation is to represent "more" of the subject, that is, "more than what it is and more than what it is named" (33). For Williams, the paradox of representing God is that God is "beyond human representations" (24). In this system, a monster is foreign to the beholder *when* it is held to represent God. I, on the other hand, am concerned with representations of being (the being of women, rather than of God) through negation. Although in the theological schema the monster, or freak, is wholly unrecognizable to the beholder, in the fiction I examine, I claim that the freak-woman (for example) becomes for the reader a *half-recognizable* creature. The figure must appeal to both the rational and irrational sensibilities of readers in order for the grotesque aesthetic to function.

always an element of the sign (the monster or the freak) that is recognizable to readers. The ambivalence of the sign--as both recognizable and unrecognizable--functions to purge the minds of readers of all reconcilable associations so that they may dedicate themselves to grappling with the concept at hand. Negation obliges readers to look at a grotesque image that is so far from their customary means of identification that readers are not able to draw upon preconceived notions of understanding. And yet, readers do not abandon the search for meaning for they have, in an ambivalent reaction to an ambivalent representation, an attraction to the very object of their repulsion and confusion.

For example, Barbara Gowdy's short story "Sylvie," from her collection *We So Seldom Look on Love* (1992), depicts the character of Sylvie, a woman who as a result of a deformation has an extra pair of legs protruding from her hips, and a second functioning bowel and female reproductive organs. This deformity is the remains of her twin sister who did not fully form in her mother's womb. Sylvie and her mother refer to the legs as "Sue" and treat them as though they are a second sister/daughter within the family. While Sylvie alone has a head, chest, arms and brain, "Sue," nevertheless has her own, non-coinciding menstrual cycle, and reacts independently (and despite Sylvie's own indifference) to the amorous advances of a suitor, with twitches, kicks, and sexually stimulated tingling.

When I examine the short story not only as a grotesque story (in which opposites clash) but, more particularly through the system of negation, my analysis illustrates the following: Gowdy writes about the paradox of representing "women." For Gowdy,

traditional social constructions of women consist of a rational discourse that does not fit a reality Gowdy strives to represent: woman is not the opposite of man, woman is not the Other, and is thus neither superior nor inferior to the notion of man. The system of negation, as I apply it, shows that Gowdy uses a grotesque sign--Sylvie as "freak"--to *negate* social constructions of women. Readers are then obliged to give up on their tendency to rely on known categories to understand the concept of women, and thus cannot fashion women through their own image, or through pre-constructed images of what a woman is supposed to be. The process of "purifying" the minds of readers serves principally, I believe, to enlarge the readers' capacity to include subjects who are normally excluded from categories of being. Equally, Sylvie as freak, or as a deformed woman, symbolizes the paradox of the representation of women: the concept of women cannot be "shown forth" except in ways that appear illogical.

Therefore, the philosophy of *via negativa* shows that the binary opposition of man/woman is a category "logical" to human understanding. Contrarily, the monster as a sign of woman is *not* a rational form of expression. But thanks to Williams' work on mediaeval grotesque, we know that certain concepts are best represented in "ways intolerable to logic" (4). Thus, *via negativa* is useful to me because I show that the grotesque aesthetic is an effective means of outwitting those rational categories that prevent readers from clearing their minds of preconceived notions in order to move "closer" to the concept at hand.

That is, the function of negation is to purify the mind of rational categories because these categories limit the readers' grasp of concepts such as the "being of woman." My

question is how can readers grasp the "being" of Sylvie, Gowdy's physically deformed protagonist? Gender does not serve to guide readers since the character of Sylvie does not fit into a pre-conceived gender classification: she is not "feminine" because she is excessively feminine (she is not one woman but two, she has two vaginas, two wombs . . .); Sylvie is not merely a sister or a daughter, for the presence of Sue confuses those categories. For example, both her own doctor and her fiancé define Sylvie as the "autosite" in an "autosite-parasite" relationship (51). As "female," Sylvie is not the opposite of "male" because her differences are not comparable, just as physically she differs greatly from other women. Even her circus act negates gender categories for Sylvie portrays herself as half man, half woman, a role that her body does not support. Sylvie, in short, defies gender categories consciously and unconsciously.

For readers, Sylvie exists in unfamiliar territory as a person who seems to be two people in one. As Stephen Jay Gould writes of the famous conjoined twins Ritta-Christina: "One question has always predominated in this case--individuality." Even "history's most independent Siamese twins," Chang and Eng, "apparently harbored private doubts about their individuality. They signed all legal documents 'Chang Eng' and often spoke about their ambiguous feelings of autonomy" ("Connections" 69). Gender is thus an inadequate category of inquiry, as well as inappropriate and unfruitful to readers who enquire into Gowdy's representation of Sylvie through the grotesque aesthetic. Negation, on the other hand, applied to Gowdy's grotesque aesthetic, brings readers into the depths of the paradox of Gowdy's representation of woman, liberating readers to the being of Sylvie. Sylvie is thus not merely a woman who is silenced,

abused, and oppressed, but is a heterogeneous being who exceeds the limitations society imposes upon her.

What I require to examine subjectivity is a model with which the critic can lay out the different narrative strategies an author uses in the grotesque. *Via negativa* is not a literary model. It is a form of discourse, "a language of the monstrous," as termed by Williams. Although it is considered a philosophic position, it is originally and primarily an approach to God, a way to surmount rationality and assertion through grotesque or monstrous images to become closer to God. Because I look into the subjectivity of such characters as Gowdy's Sylvie, I need to examine Sylvie's agency: how does Sylvie as a person relate to the acts she performs, and most importantly, how does she posit herself in the act of speaking? This means that the study of subjectivity in the grotesque is for me, first and foremost, a study of voice in fiction. While Russo's work on the female grotesque examines the way gender and identity are formed, her focus is multidisciplinary media (films and art, as well as literature) and not specifically narration in fiction. Authors Atwood and Gowdy, I argue, confuse the identity of their female characters through narrative strategy. They confound identities in order to best "show forth" paradoxical aspects of the subjectivities of their characters, and illuminate the complexities relating to their role within society. As Gould writes, the world is made up of "fuzzy" frontiers, where "Objects at these boundaries will continue to confuse and frustrate us so long as we follow old habits of thought and insist that all parts of nature be pigeonholed unambiguously to assuage our poor and over overburdened intellects" ("Paradox" 95).

I develop and propose a literary model which I call the middle voice that both charts and emphasizes the role of voice in an author's representation of a subject. The middle voice model enables me as a critic of the literary grotesque to ask of fiction: Who is the person speaking, what do the speech acts of the narrator tell me about the speaker, and in what way do the narrative strategies of these authors point to the lengths the author has gone to avoid determinism in language? As I will show, the middle voice enables the critic to both inquire into and investigate these questions.

I would like to clarify that, although I originally began work on the middle voice when I perceived the need for a theoretical model that could reinforce analysis of the grotesque aesthetic, the middle voice model as I have developed it stands independent of the grotesque aesthetic. As I will explain further, the middle voice is a model for the analysis of voice in fiction. It is useful in any circumstances wherein the agency of a character, narrator, or implied author is obscured. When a speaker in a literary work prompts readers to ask "who is speaking?" the middle voice model helps readers to map out the different strategies at work in the narrative and the effects they have on readers. Therefore, the grotesque aesthetic need not be present in a work of fiction for the critic to apply the middle voice method. On the other hand, the model is necessary for me to investigate confounded subjectivity in the grotesque.

The middle voice model

There is a phenomenon that occurs (in both grotesque and non-grotesque fiction) in the manner in which stories are narrated that I uncover here to address how narrative strategies work in fiction, including fiction of the grotesque. According to this phenomenon, the narrator, whose role as agent is to consciously instigate the act of

telling a story, does not fulfil that role in any clear manner, and no single consciousness seems to govern the narration. Rather, a kind of "doubled" discourse[43] unfolds. Narrators tell a story, or so it seems, yet they are simultaneously active *and* passive in their role as narrators, both present *and* absent in the telling of the story, or what is termed the "narrating instance" by Gérard Genette. In order to try and deal with some of the interesting problems posed by narrative voice,[44] I rely here on a literary model of the middle voice.

Literary theorists are careful to distinguish between "voice"--who speaks--and "point of view"--who sees. This was one of Genette's primary tasks, for example. Relying on Genette, Gerald Prince says that voice involves the study of "who 'speaks,' who the narrator is," and "what the narrating instance consists of" (103). To consider voice and the speaking subject, I examine Atwood's *Alias Grace* as it is not only a well-known novel, but provides a good example, at various levels, of what I shall hereafter term "middle voice" or "middle discourse."[45] In Atwood's discourse, the question of "who 'speaks" remains unresolved, and is indeed, irresolvable. Understandably, such narratives pose considerable problems for the literary critic who lacks the critical

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[43] Discourse not only signifies the kinds of "utterances" performed in a text, but also points to the way a narrative is "expressed" (rather than the "content" of its story). As Gerald Prince defines it, discourse is "the 'how' of a narrative as opposed to its 'what'; the narrating as opposed to the narrated" (21).

[44] I have tried to make the distinction between grammatical voice and literary voice as clear as possible throughout the paper.

[45] What I begin to define here as middle discourse is present in the work of other Canadian authors, such as Alice Munro, and is in no way exclusive to Canadian fiction, as the work of Toni Morrison and J. M. Coetzee (for example) attests. *Alias Grace* is also a novel that contains grotesque elements, although for the present purposes, I focus on its narrative strategy of ambiguous agency rather than on the grotesque aesthetic.

language with which to interpret this type of ambivalence--or co-existence of two opposites--in discourse.

Presently, there is no adequate terminology or model in literary voice theory to deal with and interpret the kind of ambiguous agency evident in Atwood's work. Readers sense that the narrator, the very character who is present and telling the story, is somehow absent from and simultaneously not in control of the story she (paradoxically) tells. The words are not her own. As readers, we are prompted to ask, Whose version, then, is it? Who is the agent in these stories? And how do we talk about such a thing?

In literary theory, voice points to the notion that readers "hear" a novel's discourse or the speech of the novel's different participants in the act of reading. But voice refers both to the totality of all of the different narrative positions voiced through the characters, narrators, and implied author(s) of a literary work,[46] and to the way in which each voice can be distinguished (or not) from another. A third, related aspect of voice involves the *narrating instance*--the act of narration that takes place in the novel. According to the linguist Emile Benveniste, the narrating "instance" or "situation" is the moment that speech is "actualized" or spoken by a character (217). Following Benveniste, Genette distinguishes in narrative two elements: story--the "what" of a narrative--and discourse--the "how" of a narrative (Prince 21). Thus, instead of examining the story told by a narrator in fiction, Genette's concept of voice directs us to the actual moment of speech,

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[46] Wayne C. Booth's term "implied author," refers to the reader's sense of "a convincing authorial voice and presence whose values, beliefs, and moral vision serve implicitly" to create an effect upon the reader (see "Voice" in Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*). The "implied" author, a fictitious figure or voice in the literary work, is to be distinguished from the actual biographical writer.

the situation to which its enunciation is related, and the effects created by the "narrating instance" (Genette 212-13). In *Alias Grace*, for example, when Grace Marks narrates a story (either to her doctor or to readers), her speech act carries with it several signs that can be interpreted in relation to the time of her narrating, the place in which she tells her story, the narratee (the person to whom she tells it), and her state of mind. Voice thus relates to "the entire set of conditions--human, temporal, spatial--out of which a narrative statement is produced" (Genette 31, note 10). The task of the voice theorist, therefore, is to examine the processes involved in the act of telling of a story and to look to "the way in which the narrating itself is implicated in the narrative" (Genette 31).

Because Genette's work provides a map to the complex process and structure of a text's narrative, I am able to draw upon the distinction between *what* is narrated, and *how* it is narrated, without losing sight of the interconnections between the "story" Grace tells and her "discourse"-- the way in which she tells it. Through voice, the relationships between narrating and narrative, and between narrating and story, are established (31-32).[47] Genette created his own narrative model when he recognized the need for a theory of discourse flexible enough for Proust's representation of experience in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. In his lengthy chapter on voice, Genette underlines the difficulties the critic faces in distinguishing the levels and structures of narration:

> A narrating situation is, like any other, a complex whole within which analysis, or simply description, cannot differentiate except by ripping apart a

[47] "Narrating" is the actual moment when events are recounted, meaning the discursive act in a literary work rather than the "story." "Narrative" focuses on the telling of a fictional event (by one or more narrators to one or more listeners) as a process or structure. Finally, "story" is the content or events that make up a narrative (Prince 57, 58, 91).

> tight web of connections among the narrating act, its protagonists, its spatio-temporal determinations, its relationship to the other narrating situations involved in the same narrative, etc. The demands of exposition constrain us to this unavoidable violence simply by the fact that critical discourse, like any discourse, cannot say everything at once. (215)

In recognizing the limits of critical discourse, Genette acknowledges the tension between texts (which can, as Jonathan Culler notes, create any number of bizarre narrative situations) and the critical models constructed for the purpose of their analysis: "It may well be that narratives will usually prove anomalous because our models of narrative procedures are always based on models of reality" (Culler 13).

The model of the middle voice resembles Genette's narrative method in that it is based on grammar. Voice is regarded in connection to an action, as the relationship of the verb to its subject (213). For Genette, voice involves the speaker and the listener in either an active or a passive role: somebody "carries out *or* submits to the action" (my emphasis), somebody utters it, while still others function in a passive manner in the narration (213). The narrating instance, in other words, is restricted in Genette's model to a division between the binary opposition of active and passive. Furthermore, it is the question of subjectivity in the narrative instance that marks the difference between Genette's method and the method used in the present analysis of narrative in *Alias Grace*. Benveniste demonstrates how the act of narration revolves around the use of the pronoun "I." Each time a narrator uses "I" to "posit himself as 'subject'" marks a unique narrating situation (Benveniste 224). Grace may speak of herself in one moment as "I,"

but this does not mean that the next time she uses the pronoun that she is referring to the same "I." As Benveniste explains:

> If I perceive two successive instances of discourse containing I, uttered in the same voice, nothing guarantees to me that one of them is not a reported discourse, a quotation in which I could be imputed to another. It is thus necessary to stress this point: I can only be identified by the instance of discourse that contains it and by that alone. It has no value except in the instance in which it is produced. (218)

Once Benveniste defines "I" in terms of the moment of speech, he sets up the polarity of I/You, or Self/Other, since it follows that a speaker ("I") refers to herself as such in relation to a second person ("You") whom she addresses (218). This "polarity of person is the fundamental condition in language" (225).

When we examine the narrative instance, then, we look to understand who the subject is that speaks of herself as "I." We also, however, establish the notion of a distinct consciousness, for when the narrator posits herself as a subject defined as "I," she is also, according to Benveniste, positing a "You" in the person spoken to. "Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast" (224). What poses a problem for an analysis of narrative in *Alias Grace* is the very claim made by Benveniste that a narrator must establish herself as an "I" within her own consciousness in order to make herself "accessible" in her communications to the "Other" whom she addresses. It is the way in which Grace posits herself as a subject--or fails to posit herself as a subject in Benveniste's terms--that is at the heart of the problem. As I will

discuss further, Grace does not project (or perhaps even experience) this "fundamental" antinomy of I/You which would clearly establish herself as a single consciousness addressing another distinct consciousness exterior to herself. While the concept of the middle voice in fiction does not seek to illuminate a discourse that says "everything at once" (Genette 215) it does offer a means whereby the critic can visualize the discourse of a text as occupying two opposing levels at the same time. This possibility exists in the very linguistic structures of our language: the grammatical category of voice.

Opposition is inherent in our very language and cognitive thought processes. In ordinary speech and thought, we commonly express ourselves in terms of "either/or." In English we are bound, to a certain extent, by the linguistic structures of grammatical voice to form a phrase that is either active or passive. Yet, there is another verb category present in our speech that bypasses this distinction. It is a category of grammar called the middle voice, one that is neither active nor passive, but rather both at the same time. The middle voice "traditionally refers to an inflectional category of the verb in Indo-European languages like Greek" (Fagan 1), but exists in modern English today (as well as French, German, and other languages). "It is a voice that is hard to think in and with" writes Charles E. Scott. "In both its possibilities and its lapses in our western grammars it speaks with an antiquity that exceeds that of our oldest philosophers" ("Middle" 160). This third category of voice, somewhat disputed by linguists,[48] is defined by M.H. Klaiman:

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[48] Grammatical voice is one of the most ancient subjects of study in the history of grammar (Klaiman 1) and also one of the most debated. As Lyons points out, "the interpretation of voice is a matter of considerable controversy, both in the present time and in the Western grammatical tradition" (373). No exception to the rule, the definition of the middle voice, specifically, has eluded general consensus (Kemmer 1). Linguists debate about the origins of the middle voice, its

> In a middle construction, the viewpoint is active in that the action notionally devolves from the standpoint of the most dynamic (or Agent-like) participant in the depicted situation. But the same participant has Patient-like characteristics as well, in that it sustains the action's principal effects. (3)[49]

In a sentence that is both active and passive, such as the middle construction "Ellen kisses nicely," agency becomes questionable and perplexing. The subject "Ellen" could be the agent and thus the most active participant in the act of kissing another, whose presence is only implied. But the subject Ellen could also be a patient--passive, in other words--in the sense that she endures the act of the embrace. Thus, there is ambiguity as to whether Ellen is the person who kisses (others) nicely, or the person being kissed

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function, as well as its properties in modern languages. Emile Benveniste points to the difficulty of classifying a category of grammar that displays such a range of properties from one language to another (147). Sarah Fagan approaches the problem by focusing on middle constructions in German, drawing out the similarities between middles in that language and others. One of the first linguists to attract attention to the middle voice was John Lyons in his authoritative study, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. Lyons claims that the active and the middle were, originally, the principal verb forms in Greek voice. The passive, according to Lyons, was developed in Greek and other Indo-European languages much later (373).

In 1966, two years before Lyons's text appeared, Emile Benveniste published *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (translated into English 1971), which devotes a short chapter to the middle voice. A first article by Benveniste, "Actif et moyen dans le Verbe" was published in 1950 (see Gonda n. 53, p. 41). Thus, both Benveniste and Lyons have been forerunners in the study of the middle voice in linguistics. "In place of an opposition between active and passive," writes Benveniste, "there was in historical Indo-European a triple division: active, middle, and passive [. . .]" (145), a division devised by the Greeks. But Benveniste further establishes that the passive was, in fact, a "modality" of the middle voice, "from which it proceeds and with which it keeps close ties even when it has reached the state of a distinct category." Preceding Lyons's similar argument, Benveniste claims that the passive was formed by the Greeks as a later and third addition to the principal verbal categories of active and middle. The linguist attempts to situate the middle verb in opposition to the active verb. In this configuration, active and middle make up the principal opposition of voice. He proposes to replace "active" and "middle" with terms that designate the "exteriority" (active verb) of the subject in contrast to the subject's "interiority" (middle verb). The subject's role and relation to this proposition should become clearer further into this study.

[49] In linguistic terminology, the "agent" in a noun phrase is the "conscious instigator of an action, such as Lisa in Lisa finished her thesis." The "patient" describes the "entity undergoing an action, such as the roof in I've repaired the roof and The roof collapsed" (Trask).

so nicely. As well, the action of being kissed is accomplished with special reference to the subject: Ellen appears to *perform* the act of *being* kissed nicely, but she is also affected by the act in question. At any rate, we might ask: who is instrumental in the act of kissing?

The model developed here stems from the work of linguists on the middle voice, but is also a development of the "metaphorical leap from grammar to meaning" that a number of literary theorists and writers have made based on the grammatical concept (Coetzee, "Note" 11). Through the verb "to write," and Benveniste's assertion that in middles "the subject is the center as well as the agent of the process" (149), Roland Barthes established a relationship between the modernist writer and grammatical middle voice. This metaphorical expansion of the middle category led to critical interest in "the crucial grammatical issue," outlined by Benveniste, as to "*where* agency is located with reference to a process" (Pecora 211). But it also, as Hayden White observes, indicated "a new and distinctive way of imagining, describing, and conceptualizing the relationships between agents and acts, subjects and objects, a statement and its referent, between the literal and figurative levels of speech, and indeed, therefore, between factual and fictional discourse" (White, *Figural* 38-39).[50]

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[50] See also White's article: "Writing in the Middle Voice." Other discussions of the middle voice worth mentioning here include those of Catherine Pickstock, who saw in the Eucharist sign a means "to outwit the distinction between both absence and presence, and death and life," and as such, an equivalent to the middle voice (253); and Yael Katz, whose recent dissertation on writing, madness, and the middle voice moves from Barthes's "middle-position" of the writer to the "middle-position" of the reader and the act of reading. I do not treat Pickstock's or Katz's study in detail as my interest lies in Heidegger's and Coetzee's attempts to articulate their ideas by actually writing in the middle voice, rather than merely theorizing about the category of grammar.

The notion of the middle voice as an alternate mode of expression in language and thought has attracted the interest of two very different thinkers: the philosopher Martin Heidegger and South African author J. M. Coetzee. Both have attempted to write *in* the middle voice--Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* makes a "gesture towards the possibility of escaping complicity with the dominant discourses" (Dovey 19); Charles E. Scott's brilliant exposé of Heidegger's investigations into the need for "revised language and thinking" in *Being and Time* examines a process Scott refers to as "self-showing" ("Middle" 165). Instead of showing things merely by speaking "of" them, Heidegger's involvement with the middle voice demonstrates how things can show themselves through themselves in "a process of coming to light without action in the midst of all kinds of action" (Scott, "Middle" 161).[51] The concepts of "subject affectedness" and "self-showing occurrences," both of which I include in the narrative model outlined below, demonstrate how the mechanisms of grammatical middle voice provide a "way out of" the reduction of binary opposites to a single concept (*either* agent *or* patient, for example). Whereas White indicates, however, that relationships between agency and patiency or other "polar terms may not be oppositional ones in some experiences of the world," and that the middle voice in Barthes moves "beyond" a forced distinction between opposing terms (*Figural* 19), my work on the middle voice insists on the

[51] Scott argues that Heidegger brings together two concepts: *apophansis*, where "speaking shows what is spoken of," and *apophainesthai*, where "speaking shows itself coming to light as its own occurrence . . ." and holds them together to make a particular form of discourse possible ("Middle" 162). The middle voice thus gives access to a process wherein the process itself (and not just what is shown as a result of the process) is of interest. When Scott attempts to describe the process of the middle voice, he acknowledges that "we resort to reflexive formations, such as 'what shows itself.' The reflexive structure, however, relies on pronouns and nouns in a fashion that distracts from and probably distorts what the middle voice could say with one verb form" ("Middle" 161).

necessity of *sustaining* opposition in the examination of ambiguous agency or other confounding features of narrative voice.

In grammatical middle voice the subject is central. It underlines the paradoxical dimension of the middle voice, since the subject is simultaneously an agent and a non-agent. If we think back to Gowdy's character Sylvie, the irresolvable enigma of the subject of Sylvie is the autonomy of her actions: when Sylvie speaks, she is both Sylvie and Sue simultaneously. The definition of grammatical voice is a good place to begin to better explain this paradox: "The form of a transitive verb that indicates whether or not the subject performs the action denoted by the verb" ("grammatical voice").[52] When the subject does perform the action indicated by the verb, or more specifically, when the subject is the "conscious instigator" of the action denoted by the verb (Trask 11), the noun phrase is in the active voice. Thus, for our purposes here, agency is the key factor in the definition of grammatical voice. The active voice centres on the agent; it is a "construction, usually involving a transitive verb, in which the grammatical subject of the verb typically . . . represents the agent performing the action, and the direct object represents the patient" (Trask). On the contrary, the passive voice "encodes action which notionally devolves from the standpoint of a nondynamic, typically static participant in the situation, such as the Patient of a transitive verb" (Klaiman 2). The passive voice, therefore, does not centre on an agent; rather, it expresses that the subject has sustained the action of the verb.

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[52] I am grateful to Dr. Jonathan D. Bobaljik and Dr. Lisa de Mena Travis, Professors of Linguistics at McGill University, for encouraging a "scientific" exposé of the terms presented here, and for the discussion of linguistic definitions that follows.

The passive voice, however, *implies* an agent. Even if the performer of the action is unknown in a passive construction, for example, "The talented artists should be hired instantly" (the performer being the person(s) involved in the hiring), and certainly not the focus of the phrase, and even though the verb points to the fact that the artists undergo the effects of the action and cannot, therefore, be considered as the most active participants in the phrase, an agent is nevertheless implied--the agent being the somebody who, to paraphrase, should hire artists instantly. Passives thus imply an agent, but an agent that is absent, and "unfocused." In actives, the agent is very much present and "focused."

A grammatical middle construction also requires that an agent be implied (Fagan 52); the passive characteristic inherent in middle constructions thus conforms to this criterion. But, as Klaiman's definition of the middle voice reminds us, the intriguing dynamic in a middle construction is that the same, single participant is both agent and patient (3). Furthermore, in the definitions of active and passive that I have just formulated, the agent is either focused or unfocused depending on the voice used. The middle voice requires, then, that an agent be both focused and unfocused at the same time. The participant is simultaneously an agent and a non-agent since the same participant is also a patient sustaining the effects of an action. Since this last statement accommodates "propositions one of which denies or is logically at variance with the other" ("contradiction"), I argue that the middle voice illuminates a contradictory statement, a paradox.

The existing structure of the middle category of grammatical voice is what I perceive as a potentially fruitful representation of narrative voice and its significant properties in *Alias Grace* and other contemporary fiction, including fiction of the grotesque. As a model, or a representation of theory, whose set of propositions or "rules" are derived from grammar, the middle method should enable the critic to insert phenomena--in this case narrative voice phenomena--into a framework that identifies and distinguishes--but does not resolve--certain elusive narrative elements (or what the scientist might describe as "behaviours") and the relationships between them. The middle voice is thus a method of literary voice analysis that emphasizes the role of voice, both grammatical and literary, in representing the subject. What Coetzee writes about voice in grammar ("are there any deeper linguistic categories than those of tense, person, voice?") remains true of narrative ("Note" 12): voice situates the subject in relation to an action. While the question of agency is at the centre of this model, I have also selected a number of other significant properties of linguistic middle voice (as outlined below) that, together, serve as a tool for the study of voice in fiction.

The following are the main properties of grammatical middle voice which will hereafter be considered as a model of analysis in literary voice theory. Grammatical middles:

1. represent a sustained binary, for they display both active and passive characteristics.
2. originate from grammatical voice, an important and logical foundation for the critical study of voice in fiction since the subject is central to voice--because of its

relationship to the action--in both grammar and literary theory. Middles function to mediate between the active and the passive, connecting the two voices through the role of agency.

3. indicate that the subject is affected by the very process (an action or state) of which he or she is the agent, is seen as "inside" the process, and that a confusion of the distinction between agent and patient ensues. Based on the work of John Lyons and Emile Benveniste, this property is termed by linguists as "subject-affectedness." It illuminates a curious type of interiority of the subject in question.
4. express ambiguity.
5. express possibility.
6. function to subvert.
7. depict self-showing occurrences--things come to light in middle discourse in a special way.[53]

Application of middle voice model to fiction

All of these properties are involved in the method of narrative analysis I now call "middle voice." Now, as we shift from grammar to literature, the relationships between the model's properties and their significance in voice theory need to be considered. Although I have divided the analysis of Atwood's novel to follow the seven properties outlined above, sections of the model overlap (as will be seen) with one another.

In Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, a fundamental function of voice in the novel is to cast doubt upon the narrating instance at several levels. To study voice in Atwood's

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[53] I will expand on the notion of self-showing occurrences and the other properties of the middle model henceforth.

novel is to bring to light a play of contradiction and strategic disorder. Atwood relies on dream narratives, hallucinations, and *dédoublement*--a form of dissociation of personality from which her main character, Grace Marks, suffers--to constantly re-route her line of narrative and prompt readers to ask a particular question: who is speaking? But Atwood also shifts narrators, creates a clash between the consciousness of characters, and uses theme to draw out oppositional concepts and negotiate the borders that divide them. If we apply the middle voice analogy when we ask ourselves questions about voice in *Alias Grace* such as who is the narrator, in what consists the narrating instance, and in what way and to what effect do we sense an authorial presence, we can see that Atwood goes to great lengths to avoid determinism and to achieve, in the act and process of story-telling, a state of middleness.

The novel revolves around a historical murder that took place in Upper Canada, now Ontario, in 1843. Grace Marks, a sixteen-year-old maid, was accused along with another servant, James McDermott, of having viciously murdered a young housekeeper with an axe and having shot their employer to death shortly afterwards. They were caught by the police as they scandalously hid out in a hotel together, and were found guilty of murder. James McDermott was executed; Grace Marks spent twenty-nine years in prison. Atwood includes newspaper articles and other such written accounts of the time, but the novel is otherwise a work of imagination.

The focus to date of criticism on *Alias Grace* centers on the question of truth (Darroch, Howells, Knelman, Lovelady, Staels). Such research, for example, considers whether Grace is believable, reliable, guilty, or innocent, and whether history, as Coral

Ann Howells writes, is "an authoritative recounting of the past" (Howells 30, see also Darroch, Knelman, Miller, and Staels). Moreover, rather than perceiving the narrative and the problems of agency it poses as something that wholly undermines Grace's identity, critics view Grace's identity as something challenged or re-constructed by Victorian ideals (Howells, Lovelady, Siddall), or resistant to them (Miller). My middle analysis extends the critical dialogue by shifting focus from the concept of "truth" to the coherence of the subject in the act of narration itself.[54]

1. The sustained binary

Atwood's portrait of Grace depicts a woman who is, in almost every aspect, neither of the margins nor of the centre, a favoured servant become famous criminal. Applying the method of the middle voice means bringing to the surface the many oppositions that concern Grace Marks and confound her identity as narrator. As well as providing a model flexible enough to allow the complexities of the consciousness of the novel's narrators to "speak" to the critic in chaotic--or "doubled" form--rather than through order (or singularity), middle voice theory requires that the critic "pause" to examine the

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[54] In an informative discussion on narrative in *Alias Grace*, critic Stephanie Lovelady examines who Grace narrates to, whether to a private audience (Simon Jordan) or a public one (the audience outside the text). Lovelady frames her analysis within the context of "Victorian social questions about ethnicity and gender" (36). She maintains that Grace tells a story "which cannot be said to be truly public or private, but which moves along a continuum between these two poles" (36). Contrary to my reading, in which I claim that opposition is sustained, Lovelady's focus on the "public/private, male/female association" (38) of the novel's narrative indicates that opposition is broken: the narrative ultimately leans toward the private (36). As well, she believes that Grace has a "true self" that Grace would like herself and others to see (60), an attestation, therefore, to the existence of truth, and one that is echoed by Howells who refers to the "truth" of the past and "a woman's real voice among the conflicting variety of Victorian constructions of Grace Marks . . ." (Howells 30). Gillian Siddall joins the public/private dialogue on Grace's narrative arguing that Grace does indeed have a clear social identity but that it is "devalued" by the gendered belief systems of Victorian society (85). According to Siddall's study on truth and power in the novel, Grace succeeds in resisting these constraints of feminine ideals (99, see also Howells). I believe, however, that Atwood's portrayal of identity points readers to the question of "who is speaking?" rather than to Grace's resistance to Victorian ideals of femininity.

sustained binaries that affect the representation of the narrator and the critic's understanding of her. According to Susanna Moodie, whose published account of her meeting with the celebrated murderess is included as an introductory epigraph to the novel, Grace is a "middle-sized woman" (19). A servant who, through her intelligence and charm, wins the favour of several employers, Grace is not as well off financially as her employers, obviously, but finds herself in a more secure socio-economic position than her family and many of her peers. However, Grace disrupts the social classes when she is accused of murdering her employer, and consequently instils fear in the privileged class by this subversion of authority. As Judith Knelman notes, the class system, "sustained by trust and fellowship," is undermined by a female servant (678).

Is Grace innocent or guilty? Mad or sane? Even Grace is confused when she reads conflicting versions of herself in the papers. She marvels, or so she tells us, at the "puzzle" that is herself:

> I think of all the things that have been written about me--that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life . . . that I am tall and also not above the average height, that I am well and decently dressed, that I robbed a dead woman to appear so . . . that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once? (23)

Just as Grace seeks to ponder rather than resolve the contradictory portraits of herself that are painted, the middle voice, too, enables us to bypass resolution in the questions

that emerge concerning Grace's identity and her involvement in a double murder because it is a model that requires that two opposing terms be weighted one against the other. The novel itself resists determination in several ways, of course; the middle voice simply provides tools for its study, or "a way in."

Therefore, if we "fill in the blanks" of the middle method in answering the question of who the narrator is, Grace materializes in a very medial position: she inhabits a space between freedom and captivity, gains power through the curiosity she inspires as a result of her notoriety, but also remains captive because the mystery she creates inspires fear: nobody can say for sure if Grace is a murderer or not. A prisoner segregated from society, Grace Marks remains present, nevertheless, in the minds of the citizens of Ontario and the media, and reaches a certain public both through her position as servant in the governor's home, and through her talks with Simon Jordan, the young doctor who records everything she recounts. Moreover, newspaper accounts that claim to cite Grace's own words reach the public through another type of discourse, but one that contributes to the enigma of Grace Marks. Grace's discourse about herself, of course, is a site of competing, contradictory facts.

Central to the middle voice theory, however, is not just who the narrator *is*, but more specifically, what we uncover in an analysis of the novel's *narrating instance*. This last consideration shifts the focus from "who is the narrator," and the many ways Grace's discourse contributes to the construction of the different versions of her identity, to the question of "who is speaking" and its implications.

As speaker, Grace's middle position can be compared to the challenges that face her in her efforts to be a model prisoner, which she herself formulates in these words: "it's like hanging on to the edge of a bridge when you've already fallen over; you don't seem to be moving, just dangling there, and yet it is taking all your strength" (5). Grace is the agent of her acts of narration, for she tells us as much when she describes the routine Dr. Jordan and she have worked out: "He asks a question, and I say an answer, and he writes it down" (68). But she is also controlled by an exterior force that renders her powerless over the words that spring from her lips. She is both perpetrator and victim of her hallucinations, for example. She compares the strange effect talking has upon her to an over-ripe fruit that erupts from the inside out (69). The fissure appears inside her "of its own accord," causing the words to spill out. Thus, in the opening chapter, she speaks much like a puppet of a disturbing hallucination, switching uncontrollably from one extreme to another in her story, becoming exhausted with the effort it takes not just to speak, but to *sustain* the effects of the act of speaking. We do not know, at this point, whether Grace is mad or manipulative, yet we sense from the narrating instance that she is at least partly a non-agent, that is, not the most active participant in the utterances she herself makes.

2. Grammatical middle voice as foundation for narrative middle voice

Jan Gonda's premise of the ancient, original function of grammatical middle voice, that "some power or something powerful was at work in or through the subject, or manifested itself in or by means of the subject" (67) corresponds with Grace's state as a speaker who is both active and passive. What name does Atwood imply we put to the

exterior force who speaks "through" Grace in the novel? Madness?[55] A ghost possessing our narrator? Atwood, I believe, employs several different techniques to create the effect that Grace's words are not entirely her own.

One of the most forthright of these effects is fashioned through the concept of *dédoublement*, or "dissociation of personality."[56] Grace's consciousness as a speaker appears to become inhabited by a second being through Atwood's portrayal of the narrator's questionable bouts with madness. As Grace states, in a rather key passage, common reference to mental instability fails to indicate the co-existence of two separate consciousnesses:

> Gone mad is what they say, and sometimes Run mad, as if mad is a direction, like west; as if mad is a different house you could step into, or a separate country entirely. But when you go mad you don't go any other place, you stay where you are. And somebody else comes in. (33)

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[55] For a discussion of madness and point of view, see Bernard McElroy *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* (chapter four). McElroy demonstrates that, through a narrator who is insane—an "unreliable narrator," in other words--the implied author can create effects on the reader by "planting half-hidden clues by which the reader can partially separate what is actually happening from what the deranged narrator says is happening" (96). History, reality, fiction, and what McElroy refers to as "fantasy," become blurred in the grotesque novel.

[56] While Atwood, in the author's afterward, describes *dédoublement* as a "dissociation of personality" (466), Judith Knelman's research on medical history, in her article on *Alias Grace*, has her employ the term "multiple personality disorder," which emphasises the presence, rather than a disassociation, of more than one consciousness. As well, in the novel, as Knelman points out, the Reverend Verringer uses the term *"double consciousness"* (433), thus indicating the simultaneous presence of two distinct persons. Atwood is not always clear about Grace's condition, indicating at times that Grace's kinder personality is overridden by a second personality, in which case Grace's own consciousness yields to and becomes absent in the stronger presence of its nemesis; at other moments, Atwood implies that the two personalities co-exist. It amounts to the difference between the second consciousness saying "I am not Grace," and this same voice recognizing Grace's simultaneous presence (401). It is the latter state which I use to support my arguments here.

Often, Grace falls asleep and wakes to hear that she has done things of which she has no recollection: eating a meal, carefree, after helping to kill her employer (329); making a promise to sleep with James McDermott (330); strangling Nancy with Mary Whitney's kerchief and leaving it wrapped around her victim's neck (334). In these moments Grace is not absent: her own consciousness, however, which is normally what drives her to act, becomes inactive, as it passively yields to a stronger presence. One of the possibilities considered by Dr. Jordan and his peers (405) and strongly implied by Atwood, is that Grace's dead friend, Mary Whitney, takes up residence within Grace's mind. During hypnosis, the voice that claims to speak through Grace testifies that Grace is present, although dormant, and unaware of the utterances emitted through her (402). In response to Dr. Jordan's persistent queries concerning what key witnesses report his patient has said, Grace is adamant: "I cannot account for it, Sir" (320).

3. Subject-affectedness

The middle voice property of subject-affectedness can be applied to the condition of *dédoublement* suffered by Grace in which her role as agent is blurred with that of a patient. Subject-affectedness indicates that the subject is affected by her own action, and becomes situated within the very process of the action. Grace suffers the active presence of Mary Whitney within her as a force that causes her to utter words for which she is not, technically, accountable. But because Grace passively submits to *dédoublement* and is affected (or overcome) by it, she becomes part of a process in which she is indistinguishable from the agent: Grace embodies both subject and object, I and thou, self and other. (Moreover, Grace is also affected by her own action when she is made to bear the consequences of murder.) Therefore, although Grace is passive

when the consciousness of Mary Whitney inhabits her mind, she nevertheless sustains the principal effects of the action of *dédoublement*: she shares her voice, her thoughts, her body with an external (become internal) agent. Apart from the hypnosis scene (during which some participants remain sceptical as to its authenticity), the two beings are indistinguishable to those who keep company with Grace.

During hypnosis, Grace is best described as being in a particular "state" of mind. The term "state" needs mention, as the middle voice in grammar refers to a state: Lyons writes that the "traditional Greek term for 'voice' as a category of the verb was *diathesis*, 'state', 'disposition', 'function', etc., and some linguists prefer to use 'diathesis', rather than 'voice', in this sense of the term" (372). As a metaphor, the middle voice expresses Grace's physical and mental state of middleness as articulated in the text's discourse. Benveniste writes that three elements locate a subject: person (as in first person or third person narration, for example); number (single or plural), and diathesis, which is the subject's position relative to the process, meaning whether he or she is exterior or interior to it (150). Grace's narration is confusing on all three counts: her story is told through first *and* third person narration; her state of double consciousness disqualifies her from the category of number all together; and finally, she is *both* exterior to the processes that take place--she claims she can't remember committing certain acts, for example--and interior to them: Grace participates in the process of dreaming, being hypnotized, undergoing *dédoublement*.

We can try to locate Grace as a subject by inquiring into her state of consciousness during the different moments of her narration, for "It is in and through

language that man constitutes himself as a *subject*, because language alone establishes the concept of 'ego' . . ." (Benveniste 224). Grace's state in the dreams she recounts having would be adequately described as a state of "passion." The term "passion" refers to "The fact or condition of being acted upon or affected by external agency."[57] Suffering and passion are concepts that point to the irreducibly double-sided nature of Grace's state of mind: she suffers, but is also the agent *of* her suffering; her passion--or passivity--is also what animates her, for it allows her to be a part of a process in a special way. When she yields to an external force like Mary Whitney's presence, for example, Grace's soul--her "animus" (the term's Latin root means "breath"), is given a peculiar opportunity for existence.

Specifically, Atwood directs us to the notion of the animus, or soul (animus is also "mental impulse, disposition, passion"[58]) when Simon Jordan recollects the story-line of the Bellini opera, *Sonnambula*. The main character, Amina--an anagram for "anima"--sleepwalks herself into grave danger and, by the same act, restores her chaste reputation. "But why," he wonders, "was the soul depicted as unconscious? And, even more intriguingly: while Amina slept, who was doing the walking?" (321). A theory of "hysteria" of the mid-nineteenth century included in the novel comments that "When the fit is going off, the patient mostly cries bitterly, sometimes knowing all, and at other times

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[57] "Passion," *Oxford English Dictionary.* 2nd ed. 1989 (ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner), Additions 1993-7 (ed. John Simpson and Edmund Weiner; Michael Proffitt), and 3rd ed. (in progress) Mar. 2000- (ed. John Simpson). *OED Online.* Oxford University Press. 19 Sept. 2000 <http://oed.com>.

[58] "Animus," *Oxford English Dictionary.* 2nd ed. 1989 (ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner), Additions 1993-7 (ed. John Simpson and Edmund Weiner; Michael Proffitt), and 3rd ed. (in progress) Mar. 2000- (ed. John Simpson). *OED Online.* Oxford University Press. 4 Sept. 2000 <http://oed.com>.

nothing, of what has taken place. . . ." (137). How can we describe the state of Grace's consciousness as "ignorant" when the very term "consciousness" means "to know"?[59] Grace, however, says she cannot explain certain actions she herself has performed, nor even claim to remember them. In such moments, her consciousness is both illuminated and in the dark. Grace's state of awareness is a state of ignorance. It stands to reason, then, that when Grace speaks under hypnosis, Dr. Jordan listens and wonders: "This voice cannot be Grace's; yet in that case, whose voice is it?" (400).

Grace's voice is not entirely her own even when she is asked to speak in a court of law, that sanctuary of the word where one vows to speak "the truth" as one is witness to it. She is not, it is presumed, in any state of *dédoublement* in these moments. During the court case, however, Grace describes a harrowing period when she was made to recount her version of events concerning the double murder. Only, Grace loses possession of the story when her lawyer, Mr. Mackenzie, puts words into her mouth, claiming to save her from the gallows in the process:

> and at last he said that the right thing was, not to tell the story as I truly remembered it, which nobody could be expected to make any sense of; but to tell a story that would hang together, and that had some chance of being believed. I was to leave out the parts I could not remember, and especially to leave out the fact that I could not remember them. (357)

Because her lawyer does not believe what she tells him in confidence, Grace loses, in a sense, her right to, and thus her control over, her own story--or at least the version that

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[59] The Latin root in "consciousness" is *scire*, "to know."

is made public (both to audiences in and of the novel). Grace also loses faith in her own narrative (68). Even her confession is not of her own making, for she says "it was only what the lawyer told me to say, and things made up by the men from the newspapers . . ." (101). Her testimony is thus directed by other people. Perhaps Grace manipulates the court by pleading memory loss to her lawyer, but regardless, her words lack a show of agency on her part, being the words of others. They are touched by Grace--processed by her mind and launched from her tongue--but like the "forgotten" pieces of her story, are not authored by her.

4., 5. Ambiguity and possibility

Of course, one of the most important aspects of Grace's narrative involves the story she recounts--to Dr. Jordan, for the most part--of her life before prison, leading up to the murders and the trial. It is not whether or not Grace is believable that remains at the forefront of my middle analysis, but rather the factors that obscure a clear designation of the agency involved in the telling of the story and the play of opposition that emerges. In the narrating instances involving Dr. Jordan and Grace's past, agency is shrouded in the "aside" statements Grace utters that ring of something unspoken. Of Dr. Jordan Grace says: "Just because he pesters me to know everything is no reason for me to tell him" (216). She often hints that she is telling a separate version of the story--a second or perhaps even a third rendition of an event--or she tells Dr. Jordan something other than what she speaks aside (98, 100-101, 216). The implication of this "double" narration is that Atwood places on a par the story Grace utters and makes "present" with the "absent" version Grace only hints at or hides from the doctor.

When, for example, Dr. Jordan has left for Toronto on some matters of business, Grace, who misses his company, wonders about the best course of action to follow upon his return: "What should I tell him, when he comes back?" Their sessions together have taken them to the point in Grace's history where she is arrested. She says to herself:

> Some of it is all jumbled in my mind, but I could pick out this or that for him, some bits of whole cloth you might say, as when you go through the rag bag looking for something that will do, to supply a touch of colour. (353)

And then, she adds:

> I could say this . . .

From this point on, until the narration makes it clear that Grace once again resumes her sessions with Simon, we can analyse the tension between the spoken and the unspoken through the middle properties of ambiguity and possibility.[60] Whether the doctor ever becomes audience to certain of Grace's renditions remains ambiguous. "I will tell Dr. Jordan about this," is all Grace offers, "as he likes to hear about such things, and always writes them down" (355). Her narrative is peppered with phrases that denote possibility. Constructions such as "I could say this" (353), or "I could show him the scar" (361) position the narrator between two accounts of the same event. Ambiguity and possibility point to Grace's speaking act and the state(s) of consciousness involved in that act. Grace holds up two sides of her discourse at once, leaving a trail of possibilities as to their meaning and raising the question whether there are *any* limits to the story that

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[60] Middles express possibility, which means that a specific discourse can be taken in any one of two directions. English middles, such as "It cuts easily," Fagan points out, denote possibility, as a paraphrase of the same clause attests: "It can be cut easily" (54). ("Ellen kisses nicely," for example, denotes that Ellen *can* be nicely kissed.)

issues from within her. There seem to be few, if any, boundaries--religious, philosophical, ideological--that help to define, or contain, Grace's mind. Walter J. Slatoff states in his study of narration that "any indication that something is being seen from a particular distance or that an attitude is being taken toward it will convey some sense of a narrator's presence" (100-01). Narrators communicate their presence through their voice, which works like a fingerprint. Readers identify the narrators' presence of mind through the signs that characterize their voice, and as Slatoff notes, their attitude towards things. However, Grace's words expose her thinking mind as something both unreliable and unfixed.

6. Subversion

The relationship between Grace's motives to speak, her ambiguous agency, and the function of the middle voice can be further clarified. Hunger, captivity, and a lack of freedom with regard to her words and deeds in prison lead to Grace's desire to hoard her story and control its telling: "I have little enough of my own," she says to herself in "private" when Simon Jordan asks her to relate a dream, "no belongings, no possessions, no privacy to speak of, and I need to keep something for myself" (101). The succession of binaries concerning Grace's narrating act illuminated by the middle model are numerous--spoken/unspoken; inside/outside; control/release; authentic/inauthentic--and seemingly inexhaustible.

In those moments, however, when Grace expresses ambiguity and possibility as a whole system of sustained binaries, we can perceive the gap that emerges between agency and consciousness. Paradoxical tendencies in Grace's utterances prevent

readers from discerning a fixed, individual consciousness in the captive. As a result, instrumentality becomes enigmatic, particularly when Grace, in fact, seems neither conscious of her actions nor of the manner in which she contradicts herself even when she is seemingly awake. Grace is in a middle state, for her speaking voice is constantly engaged in a double structure. The conflict between Grace's motives--she says she wants to know the truth to both hide it and to reveal it for a bonus--and the fact that she does other than what she states she will do, destabilizes our view of her consciousness as "'the recognition by the thinking subject of its own acts or affections.'"[61] Subversion occurs because the conflict(s) surrounding Grace "obstructs the kind of clarity that we expect" (Scott, "Middle" 160) from the narrating instance. Grace subverts--upsets--the categories of the courtroom, of the medical texts, of truth and falsehood, principles and morality. There is no visible thread to tie the sections of the narrative instance together in a logical manner, no unifying consciousness that displays any recognizable set of signs (except middleness). Thus, even when Grace appears, on the surface, to explain the rationale behind her act of speaking, we find ourselves still trying to understand who the person is behind the narrator's speaking voice and what exactly the narrator's relationship is with her story.

When Dr. Dupont conducts the hypnosis of Grace, he attempts to explain to the small group that has gathered why his patient's eyes are open despite her unconscious

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[61] *OED*, qtg. Hamilton. *Oxford English Dictionary.* 2nd ed. 1989 (ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner), Additions 1993-7 (ed. John Simpson and Edmund Weiner; Michael Proffitt), and 3rd ed. (in progress) Mar. 2000- (ed. John Simpson). *OED Online.* Oxford University Press. 4 Sept. 2000 <http://oed.com>.

state: "It is a peculiarity of the nervous organization which must involve some sensory organ not yet measurable by human agency" (397). Grace's perplexing state of consciousness also has an effect on the mind of the novel's other narrator, Dr. Simon Jordan. As he observes Dr. Dupont and his hypnotized patient, he scoffs at the theatricality of it all. But he is also aware of the hair rising on the back of his neck, a reaction, no doubt, to the eerie state of the "awake-sleeper" before him. Grace's presence weaves its way into the young doctor's subconscious, slipping through chinks of weakness and overcoming *his* agency. Dreams are one of its ports of entry; the other is desire.

7. Self-showing occurrences

Dreams represent a middle state of the dreamer: creator of a subconscious vision, the dreamer does not, paradoxically, control her own creation as it "unfolds" (but can only attempt to direct its shape in the recounting of it). Alone together in the Governor's sitting room, Grace describes to Simon Jordan her lack of control over her dreams, comparing it to "a long and weary road that I was doomed to walk along whether I wanted to or not, and who could tell when I would get to the end of it" (313). Dreams are a form of self-showing occurrence in *Alias Grace*,[62] representing a curious encounter by the dreamer of incidence and implication. Both Grace and Simon (as he is called in his third-person narrative)[63] participate in their dreams, living through the action, while

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[62] Scott writes that in "self showing occurrences" in Heidegger, the speaker is like a "medium" from whom words show themselves (Scott, "Middle" 162). Self-showing occurrences denote the process of the middle voice whereby things come to be known in a way that defies a reduction of agency to a single active source.

[63] There are two narrators in *Alias Grace*: Grace Marks and Simon Jordan. Grace narrates in the first person. Simon Jordan's letters are written in the first person, but otherwise, his narration is in the third person throughout the novel.

remaining passive as prisoners of sleep. According to the penitentiary's wardens and doctors, some of Grace's bad dreams occur while she is awake (314). She is thus inactive in midst of the action of her dreams, while appearing to be present and in an "awake" state of mind to her guardians. The dreams have no centre, no core; they illuminate only the presence of people long gone--Mary Whitney, Nancy Montgomery, James McDermott--and the past mingled with an unfamiliar present. They are the site of a process where things come to light often against the will of the dreamer, an actor within the reverie. Thus, unable to control where her feet take her, Grace finds herself involuntarily walking to Nancy, who lies blood-soaked and wounded (314); in his own dream, Simon mechanically advances into a room full of water where he begins to drown (139).

Despite the intangibility of the dreams themselves, they have a very real effect on the novel's two narrators. Dreams bind Grace to Simon, and Simon to Grace; the narrators' consciousnesses clash and merge in a realm where neither controls his or her acts, although their waking activities certainly bear influence on their nightly visions. Their discourse unites in the pages of Simon's journal where he records the dreams of his patient, as well as his own (140). The young doctor follows a French school of thought that determined "dreams, like somnambulism, to be a manifestation of the animal life that continues below consciousness, out of sight, beyond reach of the will" (140). After the experience of the drowning-dream, Simon puts his scientific mind to work and realizes that Grace's stories of the day before have been incorporated into his nightmare. Just as Grace takes on an active role by influencing her doctor, Simon

passively succumbs to her influence. He does not seem to draw a connection between his secret desire for Grace hidden beneath a professional veneer, and his sexual conduct with his landlady, Mrs. Humphrey. Dreams define his desire but do not contain it. Believing, during sleep, that he is making love to Grace, he awakes to find himself enacting his dream with Mrs. Humphrey (352). Instead of recognizing his middle state--a passive actor in the dreams that enact his waking experience, an experience he has participated in by "letting" Grace overpower him--Simon prefers to view himself as a victim of "his own dreams turned against him" (363).

Grace's appearances in his dreams are manifested through Simon's obsession with her in the day. He acts on his obsession by visiting the house where Grace once lived and where the murders took place and the cemetery where its victims were buried (386-87). But Simon's inquiries into Grace's past amount to little, for as he says to himself when visiting Mary Whitney's grave, "Nothing has been proved. But nothing has been disproved either" (388). Simon's narration is tainted with Grace's presence, his speech a jumble of "brain-sick ramblings" (424). Most of what he recounts is filtered through his infatuation and his awareness of his own inability to one-up Grace. In retrospect, Simon sees that he was under her spell, as though he had "drawn up a mermaid, neither fish nor flesh but both at once, and whose song is sweet but dangerous" (423). He describes his state of mind in a letter to a friend once he has left Kingston for good: "I can scarcely determine whether I myself was awake or asleep" (423).

But while he continues to see Grace, he gives in to his fantasies and subconscious desires, imagining himself living in Thomas Kinnear's house, hiding Grace--in the role of maid and mistress--even going so far as to think about marriage. Caught up in the appealing mystery of Grace Marks, he finds the brand of "murderess" overwhelmingly erotic. For Simon, "Grace glides ahead of him, just out of his grasp, turning her head to see if he's still following" (407). His mind filled with Grace's image, Simon's obsession catches up with reality and his agency succumbs to desire. He finds himself planning to take out his sexual and intellectual frustration with Grace on Rachel Humphrey: "Tonight he'll hit her, as she's begged him to" (408). As though possessed, his involvement in a love-triangle leads him to a murder scheme that he does not act on, but which is a bizarre duplication of the Kinnear-Montgomery murders. Before fleeing across the border to the United States, just as his patient did eight years previously, Simon listens to a word of caution from the lawyer who once defended Grace: "the stories she told ought never to be subjected to the harsh categories of Truth and Falsehood. They belong in another realm altogether" (377).

Using the middle model elicits the fact that Grace Marks's and Simon Jordan's speech acts belong to two categories at the same time in a logic of ambivalence that is perhaps viable only in the realm of fiction. As "linguistic entities," middle discourse does not bear allegiance to truth or falsehood, but only to discourse (White, *Figural* 28), to an "expression plane of narrative," whose "form," nevertheless is oppositional (Prince 21). Middle discourse in fiction is articulated, as in *Alias Grace*, through the open-ended conditions, states, and structures of ambivalence, ambiguity, possibility, and subversion.

Grace Marks's identity as a speaker is confounded and so it will remain. But when we ask "who is speaking?" we have, through the middle model, a point of departure: the speaker is both an agent and a non-agent who is not the most active participant of her own utterances. This peculiar role creates an effect of unreliability concerning both the speaker's state of awareness and the state of her story. When we ask "who is the narrator?" we are directed by the middle category to turn away from what is "believable" and instead address those factors that obscure identity, such as the characteristics of possibility and ambiguity. Once we begin to illuminate the connections and relationships between these characteristics of voice in the novel, the narrator emerges as a figure who is not defined by patterns of taste or belief, but rather, by their very lack.

Despite its definitions and structure, middle voice analysis does not seek truth or resolution any more than the authors who write the novels to which the method may be applied. "When a word has several, even countervailing meanings," writes Charles E. Scott, "the middle voice can give expression to the word's multiple values without a narrowing effect. The importance of exact signification is not in question" ("Metaphysics" 748). As Atwood's novel attests, the study of voice in fiction requires a theoretical model that does not rely on the breakdown of an either/or structure to a single concept; it requires one that, as Derrida imagines mediation, offers a "middle term between total absence and the absolute plenitude of presence" (Derrida 157). Accordingly, not every work of fiction will "fit" into the middle voice model. A text must, above all, show signs of questionable agency in what concerns the narrating act. If we consider how Atwood's portrait of Grace meets the criteria of middle discourse--in its ambiguity, possibility, and

subversion of an either/or model--we can analyse how Atwood rejects notions of truth or determination, challenging the principle that to arrive at knowledge one must eventually reduce a dichotomy to a single concept. This study of voice in *Alias Grace* is meant to provide the means with which to identify and consider various enigmas and contradictions, as well as a framework for a process of mediation. Through the middle model, we can investigate how (to borrow Barthes's terms for my own purposes) a narrator portrayed as "affected" by an exterior force, causes an "effect" to occur upon readers through the narrating instance (142).

Middle voice analysis of the grotesque: Gowdy

Henceforth, I rely on the middle voice model to outline the ambiguous agency of Gowdy's grotesque female protagonists to show that the grotesque is a narrative strategy. In two of Gowdy's stories from her collection *We So Seldom Look on Love*, and her novel, *Mr. Sandman*, the grotesque works as a narrative strategy to create an effect on readers through voice. Gowdy's "freaks" are marked with a physical and/or psychological "pathology" distinct from the possible condition of insanity or schizophrenia that marks Grace in Atwood's novel. Gowdy's "freak" women are grotesque because of the paradoxical nature of the representation of their being. In "Sylvie," as discussed earlier, it is the excess of the features of Sylvie that project the sense of her as two people in one. The narrator of "We so Seldom Look on Love" is both active and passive in her participation in a sexual and ethical taboo, necrophilia. In *Mr. Sandman*, the identity of an exceptionally "strange" child materializes when she is a receptor for those around her. And in "Flesh of my Flesh," the telling of the death of a

mother paradoxically makes present her being as well as that of her daughter's. The middle voice serves to outline Gowdy's narrative strategy whose effect both disorients and enlightens readers as to the identity of these characters.

More precisely, as reinforcement to an analysis of the grotesque in Gowdy's narrative, the middle model specifically shows that the identity of Gowdy's subjects becomes confounded through the paradox "the grotesque is this and it is the negation of this." The narratives of Gowdy's freaks negate the concept of "woman" because their state is one of excess, and because their story unfolds while they are not simply "themselves." At the same time, the narrative paradoxically functions to posit these women as subjects. From there, the cycle of grotesque logic begins anew since the subjects posited are confusing subjects.

Critic Lee Parpart examines the adaptation of Gowdy's short story "We So Seldom Look on Love," about a female necrophiliac, to the film *Kissed*, and argues that the film version evokes different reactions from its spectators through emotion than does the original story (52). Relying on Ross Chambers's *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction*, Parpart writes that:

> Narrative, as Ross Chambers has pointed out, is fundamentally rooted in practices of seduction, and readers come to value particular narratives for the various ways in which they recruit or produce patterns of desire--even when that seduction amounts to a calculated refusal of conventional varieties of emotional involvement. (52)

If all narratives rely on the seduction of their readers, then certainly the grotesque seduces them even if it is through an aesthetic involvement with repulsion and attraction. "The response of simultaneous disgust and fascination elicited by the idea of sexual pleasure on contact with a corpse," Lisa Downing writes in her study of "We So Seldom Look on Love," "is seemingly untempered by fluctuations in religious and moral systems of authority" (154). To this I would add that questions of gender (as far as the masculinity or femininity in the traits of the corpse or the sex of the perpetrator) do not play out in Gowdy's story as they do in Parpart's scheme if we look at the grotesque through the agency of its narrator. Parpart argues that there are "power relations" (53) inherent in Gowdy's short story, such as "power-laden structures of desire and identity" through which readers are seduced by the narrative strategy of emotion (60). Furthermore, she maintains, these power relations are based on gender since emotion is "messy, gendered, and closely related to desire."

Parpart defines emotion in "a strictly psychoanalytic sense, as part of the miasma of unconscious drives and fantasies that help to make up the subject" (59). Gowdy's narrator, she argues, "an unrepentant, independent woman" who is also a necrophiliac (and thus a female transgressor of sexual taboos) gives readers the "sense of being immersed in female enunciation or *écriture* . . ." to which readers react sympathetically, "largely to counteract the official narrative constructed by a detective . . ." (68).

By contrast, in my analysis of the fiction, Gowdy's use of the grotesque does not rely on gender and power to work its effect on readers. I have shown that the grotesque functions to create an effect on readers, which is what Parpart's definition of emotion

signals--an effect on readers' sensory perception. But Parpart focuses on emotions that work to dominate readers ideologically when, in a literary text, a clearly marked agent dominates a subordinate group or person (60). However, agency in Gowdy's fiction, I argue, is ambiguous, thus subjectivity is obscured, which ultimately neutralizes the question of gendered power relations in the grotesque.

"Necrophiles," Gowdy's narrator Sandra says, "aren't supposed to be blond and pretty, let alone female" ("We So Seldom Look on Love" 145). Nevertheless, necrophilia "is one of the few sexual taboos that remain in the secular post-modern Western world" (Lisa Downing 157). It is taboo for men, and taboo for women. While Sandra's subjectivity is formed through her grotesque attraction to the dead, it is not her gender--however incongruous (as a blond, pretty female) with the sexual acts she performs (and submits to)--that positions her as a subject in Gowdy's story. Why, when Sandra does the one act that sets her apart from others, the one act that distinguishes her as a transgressor of sexual norms, does Gowdy make her agency ambiguous? Sandra's obsession with the dead gives her two choices--once she has chosen amongst them, her subjectivity does not fit into categories of "active" (male) and "passive" (female)--but only into a category of obscurity and sustained opposition:

> I could either slit my throat or surrender--wholeheartedly now--to my obsession. I surrendered. And what happened was that obsession began to storm through me, as if I were a tunnel. I became the medium of obsession as well as both ends of it. (149)

Sandra's words tell readers that her being merges with that of another, even though in appearance she is the one "carrying out" the act on a deceased person. When she desires a corpse (or "fall[s] for a particular cadaver," as she tells it) she becomes a "hollow instrument" to the point that she says that she "would clear out (it was *involuntary*) until I was an instrument for the cadaver *to swell into* and *be* amplified" (153; emphasis mine). It is obsession--not gender--that both denies and affirms Sandra's subjectivity in those very moments when she feels most alive.

The notions about women that readers may bring to a novel are restructured by the grotesque aesthetic when readers are confronted with a freak woman or other sign of the grotesque. Moreover, the manner in which the grotesque functions through negation, by representing women through the freak or monster, is a way of removing from the minds of readers all that women are not, which is the same as saying that grotesque negation prevents readers from forming concepts about women based entirely on previously established knowledge. Instead, in Gowdy's narrative, readers or critics learn about a female character while going through a paradoxical process wherein a woman is both depicted and denied. What is the implication of this strategy? Readers come away from Gowdy's fiction with both a confirmation of woman's subjectivity (for Gowdy's character Sylvie, if we recall the discussion at the beginning of this chapter, leaves a profound and lasting impact on readers as a thinking, feeling subject) and a dismantling of the notion of established truths about women. Readers have entered into conflict with their preconceived notions about women, and must leave behind the rationality of binary thinking that has placed those thoughts there in the first place. This

confusion leads readers to the liberating possibilities of grotesque "logic"--a combination of rational and irrational thought.

Those moments in Gowdy's fiction when the identity of a grotesque character is confused are identifiable through the middle voice model and the examination of the speaking subject it entails. In Gowdy's *Mr. Sandman*, the character Joan Canary is a mute child diagnosed at birth with brain damage. She is musically gifted and "unearthly" in appearance, especially in comparison with the other members of her family, with whom she bears absolutely no resemblance. Tiny, and uncannily beautiful, Joan has unnerving "pale green eyes," and hair "like milkweed tuft. That fine, that white" (1). Joan is a freak not only for her strange physical appearance and extreme sensitivity to light, but because of her ability (even as a baby) to reproduce sounds she hears in the house, such as creaking doors and radio static (53). As well, whenever Joan leaves the house she falls into a kind of stupor, appearing both asleep and awake in a condition the neurologist mistakenly calls "typical agoraphobic behaviour" (75). But it is Joan's ability to act as a medium that most unsettles people--she is a kind of freak mute child who somehow speaks through or *as* others. Her middle discourse renders agency ambiguous in the story and confuses Joan's identity, as well as that of the other members of her family.

In the first incident of the novel, Joan is just a tiny baby taking a nap between her sleeping mother Sonja, and grandmother Doris. Upon waking, Sonja and Doris figure out that they have had the same dream. Doris eerily realizes that Joan has channelled the dream between them and is possibly its author, meaning that Joan knows "things"--

secrets--about Doris that nobody else does (26). The little girl's ability to act as a medium for other people's thoughts--thoughts that are somehow inextricable from her own--grows as Joan gets older. The scar tissue suffered from her fall at birth has "enhanced certain abilities but interfered with others, mainly the ability to vocalize words" (61). Once Joan is old enough that her family can confirm that she is clinically mute, her means of communication grows more complex: she "parrots" sounds around the house (60), speaks in and through her sister Marcy, and causes family members to use the pronoun "we" in situations where normally the first person or third person singular would be appropriate (59, 61, 103, 221, 232). At the same time, Joan's identity becomes more and more ambiguous since she seems to take on the identity of those closest to her. The paradox of these situations is that while her identity becomes more embroiled with the identity of others, Joan's "specialness" also affirms her subjectivity more than ever: she is distinct from anyone around her in her freakishness.

For example, Joan climbs into the coffin of her great grandmother, assuming the posture of the deceased and turning alarmingly cold. Doris is particularly appalled to see that one of the white curls from the great grandmother's head is caught between Joan's lips "so that the curl looks like a little horn Joan has drunk from, died from, that white curl the same white as Joan's hair" (152). The family experiences shock at seeing young Joan inside a coffin with an aged deceased family member not only because Joan's youth and size contrast starkly with her companion, but also because of the similarities between their hair, posture, and seeming lifelessness. The paradox of Joan's individuality/distinction is further undermined/emphasized once the family finally

succeeds in reviving her. Joan's "sister"[64] Marcy unwittingly speaks on behalf of Joan to explain her presence in the coffin: "*'We* were hiding,' Marcy says.[65] In her agitated state she doesn't realize that she is speaking of Joan in the plural" (153). Both Doris and Marcy speak "for" (or "as"?) Joan and thus "naturally" speak in the plural. At the same time, Marcy believes that Joan is using her as a medium, that is, that she speaks through Marcy as an instrument to convey her words to others.

This becomes such a common form of communication/mediation that even Joan loses sight of the source of the words. ""We know what we're thinking'" Marcy declares to/as Joan after posing a mathematical problem.

> "We're thinking if we give the right answer, then everybody will know what an incredible memory we have and they'll say we're so smart we have to go to school."
>
> Was Joan thinking that? She assumed she must be, if Marcy said so. (182)

Joan is not a clear agent of "her" words. Marcy's identity merges indistinguishably with that of her niece: "Joan was her," is Marcy's conclusion. "The her that was tiny, magical, celestial . . . not entirely real. If Joan whimpered, Marcy's eyes welled up" (59).

Joan's family is often uncomfortably aware of Joan's uncanny closeness to their most intimate thoughts. This intimacy is brought on in part by the family's tendency to confess their private experiences and dreams with Joan. In these moments, they are often astonished to find themselves using her as a "sounding board" and "spilling [their]

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[64] Marcy is actually Joan's young aunt, but the family has covered up the fact that Joan's real mother, Sonja, was pregnant with her at 15. Doris pretends that Joan is her own child, and thus the youngest sister of Sonja and Marcy.

[65] The emphasis on the plural pronoun Marcy uses when she speaks for/as Joan is mine.

guts to a toddler. It was eerie, inconceivable" (57). Confessions--and the strong bonds they create between Joan and themselves--serve to confuse and blend together identities within the family. Joan seems to absorb her family's experiences inside her, and stares vacantly as though a recipient for their words. Her confessor's words occasionally "boomerang" back to them once they have passed through Joan, and yet at the same time, the little girl appears strongly (and oddly) connected to the people confiding in her (57). Gordon compares the dynamic of Joan's being to a piano, her choice of instrument. The distinction of the piano is that "you can get ten notes out of at once" (119). It becomes Gordon's metaphor for Joan for "how it is capable of simultaneously reproducing the pitches of an entire orchestra and as such is the instrument that comes closest to resembling the life of the mind . . ." (119).

At one point when Gordon is in a crisis over his closet homosexuality, he contemplates the mystery of Joan's simultaneous activity/passivity, wondering, "*does* Joan know? Even if he has let a few things slip to her, she wouldn't understand, she's only eight, for Christ's sake. She's sharp though, sharper than she lets on. . . ." (117). Gordon deliberates over why he has always had the urge to confide in his grand-daughter:

> And (here's where it gets out of hand) why can't he distinguish between what he's said out loud and what he's only thinking? Dead-giveaway words--"lover," for example, or worse: "queer" . . . will suddenly seem to be booming off the walls, and he'll jerk up and gape at her alert little face in the back of

> the closet while the words, whether he spoke them or not, settle like nuclear fallout. "Did Daddy just say something?" he might ask. (117)

In the sharing of problems and concerns the source of the words spoken to describe dilemmas or experiences becomes blurred. There is no clear track of words pronounced or merely thought, and no judgement pronounced upon the experiences (117), they merely become shared, and thus through Joan become a kind of communal property. This has a healing effect on family members, although it is not enough to completely stop the guilt and paranoia each family member succumbs to in view of the enormity of his and her "secret" problems. But in the novel's denouement, Joan again acts as a catalyst and improves her family's relationships by simultaneously effacing and establishing her subjectivity.

Doris, Gordon's wife, wants to keep her lesbianism secret, yet Joan becomes aware of it (probably from an impossibly early age if readers remember the dream Sonja and Doris share thanks to Joan) in different ways: telepathically, perhaps, but also when she emerges from her bedroom and witnesses Doris kissing another woman. Doris has also probably confessed to Joan, although she doesn't remember when or whether she did or not. Such incidents recur in the family over the years. Gordon, Doris's husband, purposely confesses his secrets to Joan, as does Marcy, but Joan is also eerily present at times when members of the family do not realize she can overhear. Finally, during the climax of the story, the family listens to some artistic tapes that Joan, after years of work on them as a pet project, has mixed together. The family hears their own confessions, secrets, and jumbled words. Joan thus "speaks" the very words that the family members

could never say to one another, by recording, selecting, and perhaps even splicing words together. Some of the revelations are denied or unclaimed by the family, who argue that they do not remember ever pronouncing them out loud. However, heaving a collective sigh of relief, the family recognizes their unique experience, in which they were both players and spectators:

> "We were her instrument," Gordon says quietly. This he truly believes and is in awe of.
>
> "We were her audience," Marcia says. (258)

Like Atwood's *Alias Grace*, Gowdy's characters battle with notions of essentialism, epitomized in Gordon's maxim: "The truth is only a version" (2). Gowdy fills her narrative with ambiguities about truth and identity principally through her focus on a young freak, Joan, Gowdy's mute speaker.

Gowdy's grotesque places readers simultaneously within the rational (for the world of the Canary family is not fantasy) and the irrational through the mad mix of an eccentric family and its youngest member, Joan Canary. Joan is excessively strange, excessively gifted, yet her character is grounded in clinical phenomena related to albinism and autism. As Gowdy reveals the unconventionality of the Canary family, often with such candour and brutality as to render sexual relationships in a grotesque light, the character of Joan--sign of the freak--purifies the readers' mind of conventional power struggle between the sexes. Joan defies distinctions between child and adult, innocence and experience. The Canary family's secrets are genderless in the consciousness of Joan, for she does not distinguish between or focus on the gender of her family

members nor their sexual orientation, but only mediates, or submits to the act of mediation. Thus, issues of homosexuality (Doris and Gordon), promiscuousness (Marcy), and childbearing out of wedlock (Sonja) are all rendered equal through Joan's "shared" consciousness. Doris is not defined as a woman in comparison to any kind of male norm, for example, for the world of the Canary family is a grotesque one in which normal and abnormal are inextricable. "Things that seem separate are often the different sides of a unity," writes Gould ("Paradox" 95). This is the "virtue" of paradox--of the *grotesque* paradox, I would say--"its stubborn intractability" (Gould 79).

Joan becomes a mediator whose subjectivity is posited through opposition: she is both passive and active in much of what she does or submits to, and both female and male simultaneously within her consciousness since she affects and is affected by both sexes (her mother and her father, for example). Joan mimics sounds, and expressions, not sexual differences; as far as gender, she is indiscriminate. A little girl, Joan is also a freak; her subjectivity as a "girl" is thus negated through this sign, but the possibilities of the meaning of the term "girl" becomes, as a consequence, enlarged for readers.

Gowdy's themes of homosexuality and promiscuity lead to the question: What about stories (one might ask) that depict sexual identity as a major factor of the confused subjectivity I have been examining until now? Could I, or do I claim, that a story about a transsexual, for example, could somehow not engage with the power struggle that feminist female grotesque theory engenders? Would my reinforcement of the grotesque using the middle voice model succeed in dismantling Russo's claim that "the female is always defined against the male norm?" (12). I examine Gowdy's short

story "Flesh of my Flesh," from *We So Seldom Look on Love* to illustrate that, even when a story's characters emphasize a theme of sexual identity in fiction, the grotesque aesthetic still functions through sustained opposition in which neither the concept of male nor female dominates.

In "Flesh of my Flesh," Marion Judd marries for the second time, only to find out that her husband is a "woman" about to undergo a sex change operation. The short story revolves around the violent murder of Marion's mother that has devastated and continues to haunt Marion as she enters adulthood. Gowdy confuses the identity of the characters through the grotesque, a strategy that comes through when I examine voice, that is, the characters and narrator as speaking subjects. Although the characters search for themselves, Gowdy offers no resolution to their quest, or problems--only a profoundly human sense of hope amidst (and because of) absurdity.

Ellen Judd, Marion's mother, was murdered by a school janitor who, demented and angry in his belief that his amorous advances had been thwarted, walked into her home and killed her with a shotgun. Marion cannot reconcile the violent occurrence--and namely the overlooked piece of her mother's skin she finds still stuck to the refrigerator--with the person she knew and loved. Becoming hysterical with the sight of the remnant of her mother's flesh, she cannot get a hold on the *being* of her mother: "up until that moment her imagination had steered clear of the smithereens her mother was blown into" (156). The narrator's use of the passive tense to tell of this occurrence carefully constructs a disturbing question of agency and subjectivity: Ellen Judd has been unwittingly "blown into" a state that permanently denies her existence. Yet, the impact of

the unacceptable act of violence on Marion, Ellen's daughter, affects both women's subjectivity greatly: the telling of the murder also "positions" these women in the story, positions them in a world that the murder and its effects illuminate as simultaneously absurd and normal. Marion, for example, becomes the "someone who had survived the most terrible thing that was going to happen to her" (183).

In the moments before Ellen Judd's death, Ellen Judd seems to have actively succumbed to a situation that she was helpless to prevent, for the police and her family cannot understand why she did not turn around to face her attacker after he arrived in a noisy car and kicked in the house door (166). Instead, she continued to peel potatoes at the kitchen sink, her back to her murderer. The story about Ellen Judd's transformation into "the smithereens [she was] blown into," however, involves Marion's positing of her mother beginning with the "fingerprint" of her mother's flesh in the kitchen. In a grotesque paradox, it is the presence of Ellen Judd's absence that reassures her daughter--Marion slides into her mother's role as homemaker without ever making a conscious decision to do so. The neighbour, Mrs. McGraw, had told Marion "that the police drew chalk lines of her mother's remains on the kitchen floor, and every once in a while Marion was struck by the strangely comforting sensation that those outlines were fitted along her own skin" (159).

It is Ellen Judd's death that, disturbingly, becomes the guiding source of the short story, positing the subjectivity of Ellen through her daughter Marion, and Marion through her mother, Ellen Judd. Years later, Marion has found someone she believes to be her soul mate, Sam, and tells him about the murder, mentioning it for the first time in years,

and speaking openly about it for the first time ever. Speaking of her mother's death establishes her bond with Sam. It also makes Marion believe, once she has been informed of his transsexuality, that her pronouncement of the murder has caused their current crisis. "If it didn't instantly turn him into a transsexual . . . then it did make her fall in love with him . . ." (183). In Marion's mind the power of the murder to simultaneously create and destroy is tangible, something that can be evoked through her speaking of it; even mentioning the murderer's name is "like a toxic gas that burned her eyes" (184). Certainly the positive aspects of Marion marrying a person she finds out to be a transsexual are, for the most part, left unresolved, but Marion considers her love for Sam to be "a miracle" nevertheless. It is, for her, "the one thing, the one little tree, that survives the otherwise total devastation of a tornado" (183).

Death unites the many absurd tales within the short story. In contrast to the gruesome content of the stories themselves, characters matter-of-factly recount their ghoulish stories of death. The mother of Marion's first husband died in a horrible car accident. At her funeral, Marion's soon to be sisters-in law confide in Marion, "her face looked like Dracula's, it was so stitched up" (172). This shared story of tragedy with its grotesque emphasis brings Marion closer to her fiancé's sisters and aunts and indeed makes her feel more comfortable with the idea of marriage than anything her fiancé has said or done (172). For Mrs. Hodgson, pet store manager, her grisly stories are as much a "normal" part of life as the enjoyment she experiences in relating them (172-73). While the people who die have their identities transformed and obscured in some way, it is the grotesque features of their deaths that ironically set them apart from the commonness of

mere mortality. Moreover, in Ellen Judd's case, her death eventually brings about a positive change for her daughter: awareness and acceptance of the necessity of the absurd. Marion faces the "unnatural" (such as her second husband's transsexuality) and in doing so aids herself in dealing with the so-called "natural" parts of her life, such as her first marriage that did not succeed. Although she played by the rules, conventionally speaking, Marion's first marriage--complete with wedding and house and wealthy husband--only served to plunge her deeper into a sense of self-loss. But the murder of her mother eventually propels Marion to recognize "the frailty of natural laws . . ." (183), their vulnerability, inappropriateness, and instability.

The absurdity of stories about death, the cruel killing of pets, and the loss of family members is reflected in the very lives of the characters who populate Gowdy's short story, distinguishing them from one another. Marion's mother, for example, is born with a penny-sized hole in her back. Coincidentally, one of the bullets used to kill her enters that very singular malformation of her skin, and the coincidence becomes something that Marion not only always remembers about her mother, but that also works to release one of the first expressions of her grief: "What haunted her these days was the second bullet entering a hole her mother was born with" (166). The violence of the event--an unnatural occurrence--merges with this natural characteristic belonging to Marion's mother--a deformation she has carried with her since birth--as though the opposition of the natural and the unnatural are essential to a person's identity. With complete certainty Marion realizes, for example, that her second husband Sam, the man whom she finds

out with despair was born a woman, is the person she loves. "She knows that if she didn't love him, she wouldn't know who *she* was" (182).

Marion's second husband, Sam, confides to Marion on their wedding night that he is, in fact, biologically a woman. This revelation is accompanied by an unusual event when his dildo, which Marion in her incredulity at his confession insists on viewing, rolls behind the motel dresser obliging Sam to spend an interminable amount of time retrieving it with a hanger. Although some such sexual elements of the story are grotesque, the strategy of the grotesque narrative does not privilege male over the female or vice versa. Rather, the grotesque narrative strategy of this story is one that sustains the binary male/female by confusing gender. Sam was born a woman but believes himself to be a man. Marion has not necessarily affirmed her femaleness through the institution of marriage for she has married a transsexual. Sam compares himself and his situation to Marion's step-mother Grace, an obese woman who has stated to Sam that although she "knows who she is" she is nevertheless "in the wrong container" (187). Sam can convey to Marion what Grace has told him emphatically: "'I don't know who this fatso is . . . *It isn't me*" (187). When Marion continues to resist Sam's confidences to her about his own state of being, she says to him in shock: "You're not a man." But Sam becomes furious, intense:

> "Who are you to say that?" He says quietly. His pupils are the size of pinholes. "Who are you to tell me who I am?" (187)

In fact, Marion denies Sam's identity while simultaneously affirming it more than she ever has before. She is able to do so only while experiencing the grotesque: Marion

looks at her naked self and feels perverted; she thinks of Sam washing his female genitals and becomes sick (175). The Sam she thought she knew, in fact, has become incongruous with the physicality of him:

> Her eyes fill. The "him" that she used to love isn't there anymore. (175)

But Marion realizes that the "'him' that she used to love" never really was there, was never the concrete thing that defined her love or that gave it its life--the very love she continues to feel for him.

To help Marion contextualize her first traumatic experience with love, her friend Emma relates the story of an experiment performed on a newborn chimpanzee. The chimp is "put into a cage with a felt-covered, formula-dispensing coat hanger, and the chimp became so attached to this lactating contraption that when its real mother was finally allowed into the cage, it wouldn't go near her" (176). Emma's story points to the notion of false attachments. Eventually, Marion's guiding knowledge of the "frailty of natural laws" (183) reappears. Whereas she thought she was attached to Sam's gender she realizes that her love goes beyond what is assumed by such an institution as marriage to be the natural laws of a union between two people. Through the confusion of Sam's identity, and through the denial of gender as a means of determining the being of a person, Marion comes to life, becomes defined, just as she did when she began to care for Sam: "the breath of life was entering her, just as if she were a flattened blow-up doll taking shape" (182).

At the end of the story, Marion and Sam have lived two weeks together since getting married but remain unsure about how to work things out. The violent death of Ellen Judd continues to define Marion's life in all its incongruity:

> If somebody were looking down on them, Marion thinks--if, for instance, her mother's spirit was that clean, geometrical flare--they would seem like any other man and wife. They would seem content, she thinks. Peaceful and lucky. Two people unacquainted with grief. They would seem like two happily married perfectly normal people. (202)

The death of Marion's mother is the event that propels the story. It is a paradoxical event for the fact that while she could not control being brutally murdered, Ellen Judd nevertheless met the occasion of her death on her own terms (by keeping her back to her killer). It is Marion's mother who, in a paradoxical twist since she has been killed, continually plays a hand in Marion's own agency. While for years Marion thinks it necessary to fulfil social roles, such as becoming the woman of the house (171) instead of going to university (157), and getting married, Marion feels indifferent to these "natural" obligations, and loses a sense of herself in her engagement with them. As it turns out, these societal obligations are no guarantees to well-being or fulfilment, as her first husband's infidelity proves. Moreover, in another paradox, Marion remains uncomfortable about her relationship with Sam despite Marion's reconsideration of what she once believed was expected of her in her personal life. But as the above passage suggests, Marion's mother acts as a guiding beacon to her daughter through darkness

and instability, illuminating that it is the absurdities of life that can eventually offer a first, necessary denial and subsequent reaffirmation of one's being.

CHAPTER THREE

'Identity: the relation each thing bears just to itself'[66]

With the epigraph that begins this chapter, I seek to investigate a strategy of the representation of fictional subjectivity: there is no unity, no wholeness, no universal common denominator in the representation of the subjects of the texts discussed here, not even in the literary themes treated by Toews and Coady of maternity or of a young girl growing into womanhood. Lynn Coady's strategy of the grotesque focuses on apathy and the theme of the maternal grotesque: the grotesque strategy in Miriam Toews's novel is best read, I believe, through entropy. Coady's novel is narrated in the third-person, Toews's in the first person, yet the narrative strategy of the grotesque is the same in each text. Narration in these novels consistently destabilizes the processes through which readers understand fictional subjects.

Both protagonists are young, Canadian women, and both are nearing the end of their teenage years when they become caught up in a re-evaluation of their situations in relation to their futures. The relevance of these similarities is that in both texts the grotesque represents the complexity of being without relying on gender even with the depiction of the most conventional of what Hutcheon terms "female processes"--maternity, or coming of age (170). Moreover, both novels support my argument that fictional subjects are portrayed as doubled identities. This feat, which the middle voice model effectively demonstrates, is the principal strategy of the grotesque through which identities are confounded. Coady and Toews posit the fictional identities of their

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[66] *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 1999 ed.

narrators[67] by denying the existence of these narrators. Their identity is thus affirmed through a paradox: negation and unresolved opposition.

The middle voice model reveals the paradox of the representation of subjects. My analysis illustrates how these characters participate in a strategy of the grotesque: as narrators, their discourse both reveals and confounds who they are. In addition to established criticism on subjectivity, I will also, in this chapter, rely principally on the middle model, and thus on a new theoretical analysis to draw out and test the narrative complexities of these texts. Unlike the grotesque fiction I have thus far examined, this chapter focuses on literature that has received little critical attention (with the exception of book reviews). This is due, no doubt, to the fact that these novels have been published only recently,[68] but also, perhaps, because as grotesque narratives, categories of confusion are prevalent in these texts, thus making the central protagonists in both novels difficult to read.

Reviews of Toews's novel, for example, signal the paradox behind the main character's life. Nomi Nickel tells her story through a crippling sense of "self-doubt and conflicting emotions" yet paradoxically, "she is the rock in what remains of her home" (Belcham). Similarly, in a statement that points to the fundamental dichotomy of Toews's narrator, Lisa Nuch Venbrux writes that "We are introduced to Nomi's extraordinary life

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[67] The story of Coady's main character, as mentioned, is narrated through the third person.

[68] Both authors are well-established writers who have published several novels and works of non-fiction, and who have received literary awards. Toews's *A Complicated Kindness*, for example, won the Governor General's Award for fiction in English in 2004.

through ordinary means."[69] Reviews of *A Complicated Kindness* thus introduce readers to the contradiction of "Nomi, the voice: acerbic, wounded, puzzled, defiant, generous, odious, smart" (Richardson), and set forth the means to a closer analysis of the novel's carefully structured narrative.

Coady's novel elicits almost identical reviews as Toews's novel: In *Canadian Literature*, Danielle Fuller highlights the combination of humour and pain that makes up Coady's novel. "Such hints of Bridget's pain indicate the dimensions of her suffering without simplifying it," Fuller notes, "a strategy intrinsic to Coady's portrait of a young woman fenced in by the expectations of others (her family, the Catholic Church, the teenaged friends she parties with back home) and living in an environment where alternatives to those expectations are limited" (199). As reviewer Nadia Halim observes, "ambivalence" surrounds the ". . . emotionally bedraggled anti-heroine" of *Strange Heaven*, as the locations of her story-telling reinforce: a psychiatric ward and the chaotic home of the main character's absurd family.[70] In his socio-pedagogical article on Lynn Coady and her fiction, Tony Kelly postulates that the Cape Breton rural setting together with the demands of its communities (based on religious belief and socio-economic status) "must contribute to a terribly conflicted mental health state" for young women, and applies his observations to Coady's protagonist to the issue of mothering (214). Community and religious beliefs place enormous value on mothering, yet paradoxically encourage young unwed mothers to put their children up for adoption (Kelly 214). In

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[69] In another review of the novel, James Neufeld criticizes the novel for its reductive treatment of religious fundamentalism and its inherent paradoxes. He views the novel's appealing title as an unfulfilled promise, citing a simplistic rendering of the novel's "complexities of faith" (101).

[70] Nadia Halim, "*Strange Heaven*," Rev. of *Strange Heaven*, by Lynn Coady, *Quill & Quire Omni* 15 June 2005 <http://www.quillandquire.com/reviews/review.cfm?review_id=133>.

these circumstances, Kelly writes, Bridget "struggles to achieve a kind of cohesion of self in a fragmented and conflicted space" (215).[71] Thus, in different ways, paradox lies at the heart of the majority of the existing critical literature on Coady's and Toews's novels. As yet, no critic has examined the grotesque or the narrative strategy at play in these works of fiction.

Lynn Coady: *Strange Heaven*

Principally, what concerns this study is not merely how the maternal state belongs to the grotesque aesthetic, but also how Coady's narrative strategy confounds the subjectivity of her female character in conjunction with the theme of maternity. In turn, the novel's discourse on the concept of women becomes the irrational/rational discourse of the grotesque for which the strictly "logical" discourse of feminist scholarship (with its notions of man or woman as dominant in a man/woman binary) does not apply. "Women," in author Lynn Coady's *Strange Heaven* (1998), is not a stable concept. Coady participates, I argue, in an uncustomary representation of women in literature through the nevertheless typically "female experience" of maternity. Coady's narrator does not belong to a homogeneous group of "women" because of her participation in the "female experience" of (unplanned) pregnancy. On the contrary, the representation of the subject in Coady's novel, like Toews's, is paradoxical, and for this reason resists a "generally shared" concept of women, of the female, and of the female experience.

In addition to Coady's theme of pregnancy, the author constructs the subjectivity of her fictional female character through a narrative strategy that centers on apathy, an

[71] Kelly's article is the only essay written on *Strange Heaven* to date. It is fore grounded in education rather than in literary theory.

abject and thus grotesque state of being. Her narrator, Bridget Murphy, becomes a subject through the deep ambivalence of this state: her narrative emphasizes her listlessness to the life and world around her, but also simultaneously affirms the paradoxical hold on life she maintains by telling her story. The effect of this strategy on readers is that while Bridget's apathy becomes apparent, so too does her active assertion of her own existence.

Strange Heaven signals the grotesque aesthetic through its portrayal of grotesque elements: the array of "freak" characters, the abuse people lay on their otherwise healthy bodies, and the abject bodily functions, involving vomit, urine, and excrement, which frame the story. Bridget Murphy, the protagonist, comes from a family that consists, among other oddities, of a father who swears excessively, and of a violent, senile grandmother who is described as a "monster" (216). The children and adolescents inside the youth hospital from where Bridget recounts most of her story are as odd as the community Bridget has left and, sadly, as perturbed. Inside the hospital, 15 year old children are in the process of starving their bodies to death in a vicious cycle of anorexia and bulimia; outside the ward, Bridget's friends continue to drink themselves into oblivion when they are not physically or verbally abusing one another. Those who are not part of Bridget's "gang" of peers, such as the fertile midget Tina, who loses two of her children to child and welfare services, and whose tiny body strikes onlookers as odd next to her "perfectly" formed and strikingly beautiful three year old (34-35), are as lost and as "freakish" as anyone else in the novel. The narrative strategy of the grotesque centres, however, on the principal character, Bridget, and her experience with

maternity, which is the very reason for her stay at the psychiatric ward of the children's hospital.

In the canon of grotesque theory, the maternal body belongs to the category of the grotesque body (Russo 56, 65).[72] The pregnant body is "doubled," as well as an exaggeration of the shape of a former physical body. Because pregnancy and childbirth lie on the limits of "inside" and "outside" as Bakhtin writes, the expectant mother exists within two realms: the borders between her consciousness and that of her child are in flux, and are continuously transgressed, as I will show, positioning the mother in a kind of "middle state," an extraordinary state of being. In the maternal grotesque, therefore:

> the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome . . . Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body--all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events, the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven. (Bakhtin 317)

Pregnancy, in this fictional context, is grotesque not because it involves a female experience, but because it adheres to the criteria of the grotesque aesthetic: it is a paradox. As Bakhtin describes, pregnancy is an oppositional state. Moreover, as my middle voice analysis will detail, a child-carrying woman--in Coady's novel, at least--is both one person and two.

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[72] There is also a tradition of the maternal body in gothic fiction and criticism, as Juliann Fleenor, Kahane, and Homans discuss, for example, in *The Female Gothic*.

With respect to the criteria of the grotesque, I do not seek, therefore, to argue for a "female aesthetic" in the maternal grotesque of Coady's novel, despite the view that, as Kahane writes of maternity, "In this most definitively female of conditions potentially lie the most extreme apprehensions: about the body as subject, about bodily integrity which shapes one's sense of self" (245). Although pregnancy is certainly a "female experience" and could be, theoretically, read by a female reader in a different manner than by a male reader,[73] Coady's grotesque representation of her pregnant and postpartum mothers shows the diversity of the experience of pregnancy and childbirth through a singular strategy: doubled, confounded identities. This strategy has a particular effect--it confuses and obscures readers' knowledge of a subject--no matter what readers brings to their reading of the maternal grotesque. Furthermore, as Edmundson points out, for example, "no one would suggest that a feminist aesthetics and a black aesthetics are the same thing" whether or not they are created or read by black and white Western women (76).[74] In fact, by depicting an unusual mother and the surprising mental and physical condition of this mother, Coady negates the stability of the concept of "woman" and "female experience." In turn, she represents the possibilities and paradox of these concepts--or in other words, their multiplicity and instability.

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[73] My task is not to assume how readers read a text, but to demonstrate the effects of the grotesque as a narrative strategy on the reader. Furthermore, even if a female reader were to experience Coady's subject differently than a male reader, there is surely much diversity in the way that different individuals--including different women--read any central subject of a text.

[74] Edmundson adds: "Indeed, a culture-based aesthetics stands on surer ground, I would think, than a gender-based aesthetics . . ." (76). Ultimately, however, Edmundson determines that the characteristics of feminine writing--narratives, for example, that are "fragmented, circular, or otherwise anti-linear"--are the same characteristics found in black writing, and thus belong to an "oppositional tradition in literature" rather than a "specifically culture-based or gender-based aesthetic . . ." (76). The grotesque belongs to this "oppositional tradition," of course, which Edmundson also names "negative aesthetics."

In doing so, Coady brings readers closer to a vantage point from which readers perceive that, ultimately, the wholeness of a subject is "unknowable" and impossible to represent. In Coady's novel, as in Toews's, when readers get closer to knowing a subject by grasping that a subject will always remain in part enigmatic, the grotesque representation of woman as "woman is this and the negation of this" has come into play.

In *Strange Heaven*, Bridget Murphy is simultaneously apathetic and intellectually vivacious in her narrative. The oppositional state of Coady's protagonist becomes clear when Bridget asks herself (addressing readers): "How do you be dead?" (149). How does one deny one's own being, she asks in this question, in order to be? Bridget, a young woman going on eighteen, lives in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. The novel commences, however, in Halifax where Bridget is a patient in the psychiatric ward of the children's hospital. She has just given birth to a baby, who she has subsequently given up for adoption. She refers to her newborn as the "wah-wah" in an attempt to prevent herself from becoming attached to the child. The father of her baby, Mark, a troubled nineteen year old, is going through alcoholic rehabilitation with little success, and barely communicates with Bridget. Although Bridget displays concern about certain issues, such as the health of her ninety-eight year old grandmother whom she usually looks after, while she reflects upon her life from the hospital, she is nevertheless in a state of apathy.

She remains indifferent to the horrifying news that a young man from her community has shot and killed one of her schoolmates and then turned the gun on himself (11). She doesn't listen to the music tapes given to her while in the ward,

although music is normally one of her main interests (11). Aware of her new state of emotional passivity, she wonders, "What is happening to my mind?" (12). Although she recognizes her new indifference, having been a person who would normally and consistently become angry, Bridget isn't "worried about it" (12). She is, rather, only vaguely disturbed by her indolent state until she finds the energy to push her recognition of this change away (11). Such acts position Bridget in a middle state within her narrative: she actively denies anything that would evoke an emotional response from within herself and thus effectively becomes "actively"-passive.

Bridget's third-person narration shows that she is consciously aware of her apathy and the negative effect her condition has on those around her. She wonders if she should manifest some kind of appropriate behaviour so that visitors and hospital employees will leave her alone. The staff in Bridget's ward considers her to be a patient who is easy to care for, but they are unsure how to deal with her listlessness:

> She did nothing. She exhibited no signs. She did not cry all the time like Kelly the anorexic, or explode like Byron and have to be put in the quiet room where he'd sit cross-legged and howl like a hound. She had begun to think that maybe she should do something but couldn't think what. Her only misdemeanour had been sarcasm, which Gabby [the nurse] didn't appreciate. . . .But even sarcasm had petered out . . . (15)

Her recognition of her apathetic state and its effect on the people in Bridget's surroundings recall Grace Marks's acknowledgement of her own madness in *Alias Grace* (33). The dynamic of Bridget's apathy and Grace's madness is one in which the

subject is aware of her condition; moreover, she is paradoxically responsible for her condition. Bridget consciously instigates her passivity, regardless of whether it seems to her to be the only way to survive or her only option.

As she gets to know the staff and patients in her ward, she narrates (to readers) the dissatisfying life she led in Cape Breton leading up to her pregnancy. Before her stay in the hospital, Bridget spent the majority of her time drinking large amounts of alcohol, and partying with friends whose "friendships" were empty and unfulfilling. More and more she begins to "tune out" to the world around her as she gains awareness about what she dislikes in her life. Her hospital narration leads to the moment when she leaves the hospital and returns to her quirky, chaotic family and community. Apathy and abjection are predominant throughout Bridget's discourse about her life and current experience. In order to get by, a feat she has had to accomplish with little or no support from her family or community, she has had to deny the second being growing inside her, at once becoming who she is through this denial, but also negating her own essence by drowning her "self" in indifference and a forced, passionless existence.

Apathy in *Strange Heaven* is grotesque. Bridget's indolence contrasts starkly and shockingly with the passion that emerges from her discourse on her past and present. While it is fascinating to read of Bridget's condition, it is also troubling since the antithetical elements of her state are puzzling to readers. Coady's narrative strategy is to bring a likeable, observant narrator together with abject circumstances, placing the question of Bridget's "being" at the forefront: how does one *be dead* is Bridget's

question, after all. Apathy is grotesque because it has, as its source, the abjection[75] of Bridget. She has been brought low, to her state of apathy, through the degradation of her being; Coady expresses this abasement through women's bodies, bodily waste, and the perversity of Bridget's social structure. More precisely, Bridget becomes apathetic when she suffers from abject circumstances and cannot expel from her body and system the things she takes in uncontrollably.

Angela Burton, writing on author Toni Morrison's fiction and relying on Julia Kristeva's theory, defines apathy as: "When something enters the body which can neither be assimilated nor ejected (for example, a fatal virus), an untenable situation arises and the body collapses irredeemably" (171). Bridget is constipated after birth and cannot control her body, despite the bullying of her caring father who can only believe that Bridget's suffering is a sign of stubbornness (154-55). But Bridget can only weakly wave away her father's insensitivity with humour: "And someone gets constipated enough, thought Bridget, exhausted inside of her body, they'll shit" (154). Around Bridget, other teenagers are in similar abject situations. Unable to control what they put into and eject from their bodies and psyche, they undergo, like Bridget, "psychological abjection . . . a breakdown of identity" (Burton 170). Kristeva writes that abjection can, at an *unconscious* level, enable subjects to cope with (often by expelling) what menaces the stability of their psyches, or identities: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect

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[75] I credit Samantha Pentony here for her view of the definition of abjection. "How Kristeva's Theory of Abjection Works in Relation to the Fairy Tale and Post Colonial Novel: Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, and Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*," 15 July 2002 <http://www.otago.ac.nz/DeepSouth/vol2no3/pentony.html>.

borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Maria, for example, anorexic and on the ward for four years already (71), is an "aspiring cadaver" (154). Slowly and effectively she starves herself to death, unable to efface the negative image she has of herself (154), yet paradoxically asserting herself as a strong-willed person through her methodical suicide, a "Disintegration on her own terms . . ." (163). Mona, another teenage patient, has such a terrible relationship with her father that she crawls into Bridget's bed at night in a state of physical and mental crisis, so anguished she is unable to speak (28). All are in a grotesque passive/active middle state: they are responsible for bringing onto themselves their afflictions (such as refusing to eat), but clearly are also unable to control their illnesses in order to become healthy individuals.

Bridget, furthermore, has just had a baby. In addition to postpartum bleeding and constipation, she has to deal with the bodily functions that tell her, regardless of the fact that she has given up the baby, that she is in the state of maternity. She undergoes the ensuing psychological impact of having the child "under her skin." The only remedy her father provides is some maladjusted belief in willpower that he grounds in blame and guilt, for according to Mr. Murphy, "Bridget was keeping it all inside out of sheer perversity. . . .Bridget was too stubborn to be properly penitent and instead spent all her time stubbornly wallowing in whatever it is she was wallowing in. Bridget was too stubborn to be the happy laughing girl she used to be who laughed on his knee . . ." (155). The community within which Bridget grows up, however, does not encourage her to grow, or more accurately, to be herself. To be "in" the community means becoming trapped within petty squabbles and meaningless encounters with friends, as well as

feeling pressure to meet with pointless expectations (211-14). But for Bridget, paradoxically, it also means being on the "outside." She is aware of the fact that she does not enjoy the life she leads with her family and friends, that she desires to do other than what she does, and that she feels alienated. Readers learn that Bridget was a bright child (10) full of knowledge, questions, and energy. As a young girl, she dreams of becoming a priest (10) until she is told of the impossibility of her goal and decides instead to be a saint (14), the first sign of the lack of choice among many choices that will lead to the impasse Bridget comes up against years later.

Bridget's dissatisfaction starts with her family and the chaos at home consisting of the demands of her loud father, a man who "attributed deviation from the normal mode of behaviour to just stubbornness," her mentally retarded uncle, senile grandmother, and angry brother (155). Whereas Bridget subconsciously wants to "be herself," to "be alone" (176), her uncommon desires are unrecognizable to her family (who do indeed mean well but who don't know how to deal with or improve the situation [181]) and to her community, since nobody around her shares these ideals according to Bridget, with the exception of a kind priest who is himself considered an outsider by the community and eventually is rejected. Such desires do not "fit" and are certainly not encouraged. Even Bridget has trouble recognizing what she truly wants most of the time: she succumbs easily to peer pressure while leaving open possibility in her discourse, realizing what she "should have" been doing instead or how she would rather occupy herself in the future (194-95, 211). There have also been the physical changes of adolescence that Bridget did not enjoy, such as getting her period (60). During this transition into physical

maturity, she observed her "parents' horror,'" her brother's "disgust," and recognized that "she had left the state of grace and could get away with nothing more" (192). These changes motivate Bridget to seek solace outside of her home, and in this, an identity.

But being "in" the community means that Bridget has to deny who she is in order to fit in--and fitting in is the only choice she perceives. Coady develops the opposition of being "in" and "out" of the community and its norms throughout the novel. The paradox, or the "catch," as Laura Hidalgo Downing's study of negation terms the "circular trap" in which the "last proposition . . . contradicts the first premise" (18), is that in order for Bridget to fit in with her peers and the "outside"--through which she seeks freedom--she needs to deaden herself, to nullify the very identity she attempts to articulate and bring into being through participation with her peers. Bridget's suppression of herself eventually leads to pregnancy and her hospital stay in the psychiatric ward. It is a gesture of active-passivity in which, instead of cultivating her identity and examining who she is, she actively censors its development and arrests introspection to spare herself from pain.

Bridget's active-passivity exemplifies the middle voice state of subject-affectedness, that is, the property of middle voice analysis that illuminates how Bridget is affected by her own actions. Bridget suppresses *herself*, which is to say that she dominates, or overthrows herself. Her act is to exert agency over herself and thus affect her own being by becoming actively-passive. Faced with what she perceives as a no-win situation, she reflects that "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, or something like that. Positive is always met by the negative. . . .Inertia was the key"

(76). Thus, apathy becomes a perverse manner of gaining control; Bridget gives up on the belief that through strength of will and through acceptance of suffering she can change the course of her life. Apathy is a safe place to exist within when "things were happening without much reason or point" (1).

Looking around at the other disturbed teenagers in the hospital, Bridget considers Maria, the fifteen-year-old who has been methodically starving herself to death for four years, as the only person who is powerful enough to pursue and achieve her own objective. Although she recognizes Maria's anorexia as a kind of suicide and her abjection as the soon-to-be death of her identity, Bridget nevertheless admires and aspires to the power Maria holds to remove herself from the influence of others:

> Maria standing apart from everything. Maria would not go to parties she didn't want to go to. Maria would not cry at the sight of a cake. Maria was resolute, always. Maria did not know guilt. Maria would never feel sorry for those who had made her life difficult. Maria would never give in to bribes or begging or be moved by someone else's pain. You could lead Maria to water, but you could not make her drink. You could stick tubes into Maria's hands and arms to pump in glucose, but it wouldn't count. Maria would always win out. (163)

To Bridget, Maria's slow killing of herself is a grotesque victory of will over all of those things that life throws at a person through circumstance. With her rotting teeth and skeletal body, Maria is "close to the physical reality of death" (70), a "big, elongated question mark" drifting down the hallway (71). Maria's identity has melted away with her

flesh, yet Bridget perceives, nevertheless, tangible evidence of an extraordinary will. Maria is not ambivalent in what she desires, she has purpose. She does not give herself out in little packages to others in the name of guilt and expectation, but is the agent of her systemic demise, the agent of the ultimate suppression of herself: "Braced against the inexorable will of mankind, of God and nature," Bridget reflects with awe, "Maria comes out on top" (163).

Yet, absurdity reigns with Maria's subjectivity as it does with Bridget's, and with the other teenagers and children. Maria has submitted to a paradox of self, seeking to fulfill what she believes is the purpose of her being by killing herself. It makes Bridget nervous to be surrounded by people like Maria and the other young patients because acting "strange" is forgiven in the ward, even expected. "It was the fear," Bridget acknowledges, "of falling into madness, the easiest thing to do under the circumstances. . . .Whenever they were all together, the air was full of that feeling because some of them had already succumbed to it . . ." (71-72). Witness to the disintegration of identity around her, Bridget feels reassured about her conscious decision to withdraw into inactivity. In this way, she neither entirely succumbs to madness nor keeps a hold on sanity, but exists instead between the two.

Bridget becomes a kind of zombie, incidentally, a staple of gothic literature and film, but also a figure that, in "endlessly proliferating variations . . . predicates a kind of ontological exhaustion" (Ellis 205). Allowing herself to become submissive to apathy, she attempts to exhaust--in the sense of both to deplete and to arrest--the source of any activity that leads to suffering. In this way, Bridget frees her consciousness from action.

She does so in a paradoxical and thus typically middle fashion: through action she liberates herself from activity and passes into a state of passivity. Historically, the zombie is defined as "'a person from whom a sorcerer has extracted the soul and whom he has thus reduced to slavery'" (Metraux as qtd. in Ellis 206). Coady's grotesque apathy, however, casts Bridget as both sorcerer (active) and slave (passive), for although she passively submits to indifference, she does so not only of her own accord but as an act of self-defence. In a sense, Bridget is curiously both dead and alive, and paradoxically so: her apathy prevents her from thriving but it enables her to cope and survive for the time being. Like the zombie who, as a human, embodies "forces" that are manipulated by a "voodoo priest," and who does not return to his or her former position within the community (Ellis 206), there is a power in Bridget at work either through her or because of her that displaces Bridget (or from which Bridget displaces herself) from society. Having removed herself from her town both physically and psychologically, Bridget forfeits her place in her community when she chooses to defend herself from its pressures and let herself sink into apathy.

Thinking about her situation from the hospital, Bridget "couldn't help but marvel at people more and more, at their reactions to her, their ideas. The way they expected her to be and respond to things" (136). It is just this type of conscious reflection and ability to analyse her own position vis à vis others, however, that sets Bridget apart from her peers. Something of her subjectivity becomes apparent through this difference, that is, through what is termed, in the middle voice model, as subject-affectedness. Bridget's capacity to assess her "position" in relation to others illustrates that Bridget is not wholly

passive, even when apathetic. She does not move to a new state of consciousness as she would were she to either reject or embrace her peers, for example. Rather, Bridget is in a state of subject-affectedness because she is affected by her own act of inertia. Subsequently, her role as agent and patient is confounded because she is the external force acting upon her passive self and as such places herself "inside" the process of her act. In this way, despite the fact that Bridget conceals her identity by denying her own sense of self when she shuts herself off to the world, her state of subject-affectedness casts light on her being. Recognizing the paradox of her situation, Bridget views taking a "neither here nor there" stance as the only possible response to an ambivalent situation:

> So she was at an impasse. And that was what it had always been like before. She could never get out of the house enough, and for a while it seemed as if Mark was her only way out of the house. Then it became the case that she couldn't get away from Mark fast enough, and the house was the only place where he couldn't get to her. So she saw now that it was hopeless and it didn't matter what she did. There would always be people, inside and outside, always at her. (148)

From the precarious safety of the hospital, Bridget has the perspective of a person existing on the borderline of ambivalence. Her position reveals something of her interior: she is affected by her own positioning of herself in a realm of inside/outside--something she has "done" as a response to "people, inside and outside, always at her." In this way, although Bridget is the agent of her state of ambivalence, she has become affected by her original act in such a way that readers can no longer distinguish whether Bridget is

agent or patient. Instead, what becomes evident is that Bridget's subjectivity stems from paradox: the more that her state of apathy defines an existence without feeling or passion, the more the opposite becomes apparent.

Apathy does not make Bridget compliant or malleable. On the contrary, faced with her indifference, people immediately sense a resistance to their own desires. The hospital staff are at a loss to know what to do with her. Her former boyfriend Mark, the very person responsible with Bridget for her pregnancy and all the ensuing feelings of ambivalence, becomes frustrated and angry because he cannot control her. More than anything, Bridget's apathy demonstrates to Mark that Bridget no longer cares what he does or doesn't do. Apathy sets Bridget apart. In a discussion with her psychiatric doctor about Mark, Bridget says she is not angry with him. "Then what are you?" asks her Doctor. "I'm not. I'm nothing. I'm just not . . ." she replies (54). Bridget's negative responses are a form of empowerment--in the sense of an assertion of Bridget's identity--for the power of negation is that it evokes possibility: "negation," writes theorist Maire Jannus Kurrik, "is always tantalizing, provocative, and ambiguous, a positive descriptive force which implies and promotes the very idea or thing that it seeks to deny. It is absence yoked to a presence, or a presence-evoking absence" (207). Through apathy, Bridget distinguishes herself from others. As a means of responding to her community's expectations, Bridget, after all, chooses to be apathetic.

Despite letting herself lapse into apathy, there are certainly elements that Bridget does not control, such as her body's response to pregnancy, which I will examine further, or the expectations of her community inside and outside of the hospital. Her

community assumes that she will do something promising now that she has entered adulthood; the hospital community expects her to look at pictures of her newborn, given to her with the permission of the baby's new adoptive parents (16); her father expects her to smarten up; her friends expect her to continue the cycle of drinking and partying she never enjoyed. But in becoming apathetic, Bridget determines that if she is to suffer from an action exerted upon her from an external force (as the definition of "passive" states[76]) when her community imposes its expectations upon her, then she is herself going to be the one who exerts that influence. When she goes home for Christmas, for example, and finds herself needing to "re-acclimatize herself to all the chaos she's forgotten about" she numbs herself by drinking rum and eggnog: "it made her serene, content to be doing whatever it was she happened to be doing. . . .Because her feeling was that really she *wasn't* doing that. This was a relief. She did not get edgy and excited like she used to and have to leave the house at two in the morning" (122). Bridget brings her state of passivity upon herself and submits to it willingly.

This middle state of active-passivity is Bridget's form of resistance. It helps her to see reality for what it is, and to figure out "the way people turned themselves into knots trying to accommodate reality" (136). Her brother Gerard, for example, when he visits her in the hospital, tells her that he believes that Bridget's redemption will come as a result of "the whole blood-soaked business" of having a baby (135). "You're better now," he says. "Learned your lesson." Bridget is amazed that her brother thinks that she has been "cleansed by it all instead of dirtied, made upright instead of fallen" (135-36). But

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[76] "Passive," *OED Online*, 8 Feb 2001 <http://dictionar.../00172517?case_id+iJaH-6JBaeo--1916&p>.

her brother is perhaps not so far off as she thinks him to be: Bridget's apathy and abjection enable her to gain a clear perception of reality. As she moves into apathy and feels less and less every day, "She looked at the stars and saw them for what they were" (105).

Suffering has led her to become listless. As a result, her subjectivity comes through to readers, distinguishing Bridget from the norms set by her community. She has left Mark even though "everybody knew the girl was not supposed to dump the guy after getting pregnant" (108). And although she knows there will be repercussions from the community because of her act, she nevertheless distances herself from Mark, and thus twice removes herself from established rules of conduct. Bridget's passivity--the not caring one way or the other attitude she adopts--conceals and protects her from Mark's aggression. It also distinguishes Bridget from everyone else--she becomes extraordinary in the grotesqueness of her apathy, uncommon through her strange identity. Mark, however, cannot understand the unusual in Bridget. He promotes normalcy in Bridget so as to be able to read and make sense of her, as well as to exert his own influence. He desires to provoke a response from his former lover in order to have something tangible and comprehensible to wield. The only way he eventually achieves this is to attack Bridget through what she cannot control: her experience with pregnancy and childbearing, and more precisely, her reaction to it (240).

The state of being pregnant in Coady's novel is a paradox. Bridget has, along with her ex-boyfriend Mark, created life at a time when, rather than reaffirming her existence, Bridget refutes it to the point of self-abnegation. Coady represents Bridget's subjectivity

to readers as a state wherein she is both two persons and one: her consciousness is doubled with the presence of the unborn baby. Despite her attempts to control her body's needs and her psychological activity, this second presence exerts an influence upon Bridget's consciousness. She struggles to cope with her pregnancy but does so paradoxically--she attempts to liberate herself from feeling or suffering. Her goal, in fact, is indifference. She desires to be numb, insensible, and somehow unconscious. Right after "The Birth" (55), for example, Bridget's first thought is how to "be dead" (149). She reflects:

> But it hadn't really been a thought at all. It was bigger. It was this primal, fundamental wish that the sentence didn't do justice to. The word that came closest to doing it justice wasn't even God. There was no word. Just this prehistoric need to turn herself off. There had been crying (not from her, the wah-wah), and heated sheets which felt so good and people saying she could hold it, hold him, hold the wah-wah, and all she could think about was this thing she wanted that wasn't even God. (149)

Like her desire for something unnameable, Bridget's state goes beyond words. It is effectively rendered through a grotesque representation: the paradoxical representation of a subject wherein readers are brought closer to the essence of Bridget even as they perceive that Bridget can never be wholly known.

Much like the description of the ancient process of the middle voice that Jan Gonda speaks of[77]--that the ancient purpose of grammatical middle voice was to show

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[77] Quoted in chapter two, p. 112.

that "some power or something powerful was at work in or through the subject, or manifested itself in or by means of the subject" (Gonda 67)--Bridget is in a state of passion: she suffers because, as the term "passion" describes, her condition is one wherein she is "acted upon or affected by external agency."[78] The baby's connection to Bridget, and to her own consciousness of herself, acts upon Bridget; she is both active and passive in this relationship because the baby's presence influences her (making her a passive recipient of that influence) and yet, because the presence of the baby is an inextricable part of Bridget's consciousness, it is Bridget herself, in a sense, who acts. She shares a bond with a baby that is both distinguishable and indistinguishable from her own being. Her "primal, fundamental wish" to be dead (149) and her subsequent lapse into apathy is representative of both her confounded agency, and her doubled identity. Bridget becomes pregnant during a period of radical ambivalence where she abused herself by letting herself see Mark (who was aggressive and self-pitying), by taking drugs, by hanging around with people who exacerbated her bad situation, all the while "thinking she was making herself free" (176). Wanting to escape her family life at home with all its responsibilities, such as changing her grandmother's bedpan, Bridget tries to be selfish in order to find herself. Instead, she becomes pregnant and loses control of her bodily functions. Consequently, as an attempt to gain control over herself, she in fact denies herself through apathy.

Having given the baby up for adoption, Bridget finds her current situation intolerable; she thus actively discourages herself from acknowledging the existence of

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[78] "Passion," *OED Online*. See note 57 for bibliographic entry.

the baby, and manifests a state of passive detachment from herself and her surroundings. The primordial influence of her state of motherhood is, after all, inextricable and indistinguishable from Bridget's own agency. Furthermore, Bridget's desire to be numb and, in a sense, unconscious is, paradoxically, her single greatest source of stimulation; it is what motivates and animates her. Like Maria's disturbing power of the anorexic to live on her own terms by effectively killing herself over time, a feat of "the strength of the invisible," as Coady writes (164), Bridget brings her being to life through passivity. This is nowhere more apparent than in the way in which she positions herself in her statement "to be dead," simultaneously signifying and negating herself as subject.

Negation and abjection are Coady's language of the grotesque. As Angela Burton writes, abjection denotes "a conventional and . . . an oppositional meaning simultaneously" (171). In *Strange Heaven*, the abject elements (throwing up, bleeding, constipation, human excrement) work to position *and* "de-position" Bridget as a subject. Abjection in the novel demonstrates that the narrative strategy of the grotesque disturbs conventional notions of women in a paradoxical way. Coady's theme of maternity is a conventional sign for "woman." Becoming a mother, as Helena Michie aptly points out, involves "the place of the reproductive female body in our culture" and speaks in the most conventional of ways of "the promise of safety, domesticity, and control" (59). Childbearing is a woman's experience; it distinguishes women from men, but also unites them (in many cases) with other women. However, as Michie points out, "much feminist and protofeminist discussion of pregnancy and childbirth derives its power and its idiom

from a deeply middle-class and heterosexual ideal of domesticity" (59). In *Strange Heaven*, there is nothing conventional about the way Coady portrays Bridget's experience with motherhood. Instead, Coady uses abjection to split Bridget's subjectivity through her maternity so that Bridget becomes, in the narrative, two beings in one.

Pregnant, Bridget is two people in the same body, sharing a strong bond through Bridget's consciousness. But Coady's use of abjection also renders Bridget's subjectivity as "split" because she becomes both who-she-is as well as a denial of who-she-is. Furthermore, in this process, Bridget paradoxically, as I have been arguing, affirms her own sense of being through those areas of herself that she, in fact, denies. In her article on abjection, Burton points to how Kristeva delineates the process of abjection wherein a subject's identity undergoes a split. In a rather lengthy citation that I include here, Burton describes how the "I" of a subject collides with the negation of a subject, the "not-I" in a process Kristevan theory calls the criteria of the abject. The way in which the abject, in Burton's words, informs discourse on purity and impurity that pits idealisations of women (as representations that can be contained within notions of "maternal," and "feminine") against pollutants that are not confinable (bodily waste) reinforces my own reading of identity in Coady's novel:

> Discourses on purity and pollution inform our definition of the abject in that the binary relation which sets purity in opposition to impurity (or pollutant) informs its conception. Whilst what is deemed abject can vary (for example, cultural and historical attitudes to excrement or menstrual blood vary greatly) and is never universally agreed, the inverse binary (the relation of mutually

> exclusive opposites) by which pollutants are distinguished from the pure is a common factor, and the one which universally informs relations between ourselves and what we deem the "abject." This relationship of imagined difference--by which we distinguish those things we perceive of as constituting the "I" versus those we perceive of as constituting the "not-I"--describes the way we constitute ourselves physically and psychologically. (172)

When a subject is affected by the abject, that is, when what we understand as the *not-I* "penetrates" what we understand to be *I*, what in fact occurs is that the subject ("I") and object ("not-I") collide to create a "schism of identity" (Burton 172-73).

For example, Bridget becomes pregnant and has to deal with the expectations and values of her community that she does not necessarily hold within her own belief system. These imposed values (the *not-I* of Bridget) contaminate Bridget's subjectivity and result in a loss of her definition of herself. Bridget becomes the "woman who is not a woman" because she breaks off her relationship with the biological father of the baby, because she gives up her baby (and thus separates herself from the symbol that clearly marked her as a woman, as a mother), because she responds to her community in a way (apathetically) that nobody comprehends. But the pregnancy not only affects Bridget's "social" self, but also affects her corporally.

Physically, Bridget feels betrayed by her body. Hormones that are, of course, generated by Bridget herself, paradoxically act as an extrinsic force, causing Bridget's loss of control over her bodily and psychological functions. In her first trimester, unaware

that she is pregnant, hormones curb her appetite for the unhealthy food and drink she is used to consuming; later, endorphins function to reassure Bridget that everything will be okay (16-17). Before discovering the power of apathy, she desperately tries to achieve some kind of gratification from punching herself; however, Bridget's own body prevents her from inflicting bodily harm upon herself. "Her body was designed, she realized, not to be able to hurt itself in this way. Her body thwarted her at every turn" (106). Bridget feels invaded, and can't prevent herself from thinking of the films *Rosemary's Baby* and *Aliens* (56), where the bodies of characters are occupied by a foreign and hostile being. Childbirth is supposed to be a "natural event," Bridget says to her doctor, yet, "it didn't seem natural at all" (56).

Hormones course through Bridget after the birth of her baby, causing her to bleed[79] for days. She laments over the steady stream of blood she cannot staunch, illuminating how as a subject, she is affected by the abject:

> It seemed like, even if you didn't want it to, or even if you paid no attention to it whatsoever, life, existence, whatever it was, carried on and it carried you with it. Like your body, it was indifferent to you. That's what Bridget thought. Her body was part of life and life was life and always took you along for the ride and you never had any say. (60)

The "*I*' that Bridget perceives as her self is "penetrated" by life (or by what she understands as *not-I*), and conflict occurs: a schism forms within her identity. Life, in this

[79] The substance, in fact, is lochia and is not real blood. Bridget maintains a certain naïveté of post-partum functions, in all probability because she tries to distance herself form the birth despite the objections of her body, experiencing them as they come without benefit of any instruction.

instance, is both the foetus within her, and her broader understanding of "existence"--what she sometimes terms as "God," at other times as "nature" (17, 37). As such, life sweeps Bridget into a confused, dichotomous state without her control. In this state, Bridget perceives her subjectivity as a convergence between that which she does control (*I*) and that which she does not control (*not-I*). Again, there is a paradox inherent in Coady's representation of Bridget: the exterior force that acts upon Bridget and which she refers to as "life" and "existence" is what ultimately, of course, animates Bridget. Life, in the context she describes, is both an intruder and a welcome inhabitant, both foreign to Bridget and familiar. In grotesque terminology, Bridget experiences life simultaneously as *unheimlich* (uncanny, or not-at home) and *heimlich* (familiar, at-home).[80]

Burton uses the example of cancerous patients to describe the path of bodily abjection on the psyche. Cancer patients may experience a schism within their identity when they regard the cancer as something that simultaneously is and isn't a part of themselves: "the boundary distinguishing the abject tumour from the patient's body is an ambivalent one. Cancer both *is*, and *is not*, the body we perceive as 'us.' Cancer actually *is* the body, since it is the body's own cells growing at an abnormal rate . . ." but it is also "some outside object or imagined 'Other' within" (173). Similar to Burton's example of the patient suffering from cancer, Bridget's experience is one in which she cannot escape from the ambivalent realm wherein she lives. She is unable, in a healthy manner, to reconcile the pressures placed upon her (which she finds incompatible with

[80] In his article "Das Unheimlich" (1919), translated as "The 'Uncanny'" in 1925, Sigmund Freud discusses the German term and explores how the uncanny summons fear through the unfamiliar.

her being and with her desires) with the self that she senses longs to emerge. She cannot reject what has already become a part of her. Again, as Burton writes, conflict materialises when within one consciousness both self and other exist. In this condition, the state of ambivalence becomes insufferable:

> For these reasons, things which we perceive to be abject, in penetrating and 'becoming' us, inspire ambivalence, a confusion of emotional responses causing us to become caught between desire and revulsion and unable to know which way to turn in our response. This is the condition of psychological abjection. (173)

Through abjection, Coady expresses a clash between those forces Bridget believes she controls, and those she does not. Readers, I believe, can grasp the confoundedness of Bridget's identity through this clash, that is, through what makes up Bridget's *I* and her *not-I*.

Bridget only succumbs to Mark's attempts to exert power over her when he brings up the topic of the baby and accuses Bridget of having taken his "son" away from him. At first sign of his tirade, Bridget "was allowing herself to be yelled at and abused just to appease the tortured soul across from her. It was for the greater good. He would feel better afterwards. She was above it all" (238). But when she hears the word "son," issuing from the mouth, no less, of the irresponsible man who has fathered their baby, she emerges from her apathetic state to become enraged and to throw up (240). Referring to the bodily and psychological urges she does not control as a result of her pregnancy, she says to Mark "See a round mouth opening and closing toward your tit

and live after that . . . Live and live and live after that." This lapse in her emotional moratorium is what ultimately makes Mark happy (240). He is satisfied that he has gotten a rise out of Bridget, a reaction he believes he can make sense of and that helps him to feel in control. According to Mark, Bridget is finally acting "normal"; by throwing up uncontrollably she has shown submission to him and has finally manifested some kind of engagement with the events that have resulted in the birth of a baby. When he sees Bridget's anger, sees her lose control over herself, it is the only time he feels satisfaction, for previously he could not grasp anything of her imperturbability.

Even in this scene, Coady does not portray the subjectivity of her female protagonist in relation to men, but rather, in relation to apathy and an irrational world. The people that make up Bridget's "strange heaven," men and women alike, all have their quirks, problems, and views that bear on Bridget in some way. In the chaos of Bridget's home life and community, societal pressures on women are, for the most part, absurd, and lead to the problems that surround Bridget in the hospital ward: anorexia, for example, and teenage pregnancy. Aware of these pressures and affected by them, Bridget has taken within herself unhealthy societal expectations only to find, thereafter, that she cannot accept the person she has become. During the novel's final "abject" scene, Coady again uses an uncustomary sign to represent woman: Mark accepts Bridget as "normal" and "feminine" only when she throws up. This moment, however, shows the absurdity relating to how a woman is supposed to act and feel, and marks a turning point for Bridget: although she throws up uncontrollably her abject act

emancipates her from apathy. In Kristeva's words, "abject and abjection are my safeguards. . . .The spasms and vomiting that protect me" (2).

Yet, it is not Bridget's "maternal state" in any *conventional* sense of the term that defines her as a woman. Up until now, she has chosen apathy to enable her, as best she can, to deal with what she has "taken inside herself" and finds unendurable. However, in this confrontation with Mark, apathy is no longer sufficient to meet her needs. Mark's choice of words, his brandishing of the word "son" like a weapon and pathetic arguments trigger a purging reaction: "She felt all the beer she had drunk gurgling upwards" (240). Much of what Bridget has taken in over the last year she now expels: "Eat your own shit," she spits at Mark. Cursing him in this way, she feels like "it was the most powerful thing she could say" (240). Then she throws up.

Here, the abject continues to confuse any clear sense of subjectivity readers may gain from the representation of Bridget through maternity as a female subject. Abjection still functions to confound Bridget's subjectivity for readers. Bridget's reaction shows that childbirth pulls at her no matter how hard she tries to distance herself from it. Mark, it is true, is delighted at what he interprets as his victory. But, to Bridget, her vomit clearly signals her desire to act selfishly and break free from the burden of her family and friends. The baby has become a part of her. She can neither, in Burton's terms, "assimilate" nor "eject" (171) its presence before the birth, and its effect on her afterwards, so she finds herself in an abject state, vomiting out what she cannot otherwise expel from her being. But whereas before she would occupy herself with "Drinking and doing hot knives and puking, always puking" to avoid her responsibilities

of changing her grandmother's bedpan and cleaning the nose of her mentally-challenged uncle (176), her confrontation with Mark suggests a turning point. While she still relies on old, ineffectual habits such as drinking to escape from her problems, and while there is no resolution to the opposition that surrounds Bridget's state of consciousness, she demonstrates that she is now able to read Mark and his pathetic desire for control. Thus, even while Bridget herself is overcome by feelings and suffering she cannot keep in check, reacting uncontrollably to the evocation of the baby and its presence affirming itself in her own consciousness, she realizes with indifference that Mark wants to make amends, to become friends. "It had all been about winning," it dawns on her as she looks at Mark: "It had all been about making the woman puke" (240).

Bridget stands for the negation of a rational discourse on women. Coady does not construct Bridget's subjectivity in relation to Mark, that is, in relation to gender and the hierarchical logic of gender, but rather, through the grotesque. Bridget becomes, in an analysis of Coady's narrative strategy of the grotesque, an uncustomary sign that represents woman as paradox. The effect of her discourse as narrator, when she throws up and says 'it had all been about making the woman puke," is to create a contradiction: the closer readers approach elements of Bridget's identity, the further readers get from resolution or certainty. Bridget is not apathetic when she analyses Mark's power tactics, yet she speaks while overcome by the experience of childbearing and the presence of the baby. It is this doubled state that defines Bridget during her moment of confrontation with Mark. Bridget does not posit herself as an "I" in relation to Mark as "You." Her

middle state, rather, underlines that Bridget's subjectivity reveals and conceals itself through an opposition of "I" and "not-I." What I have attempted to show is that each speaking act of Bridget's confirms the positioning of her subject as one that is locked into this opposition.

Miriam Toews: *A Complicated Kindness*

The narrative strategy of the grotesque in Lynn Coady's novel, I have argued, centers on apathy; in Miriam Toews's novel, *A Complicated Kindness*, it is through entropy that the strategy of the grotesque paradoxically both posits and destabilizes subjectivity. Entropy designates a "turning" or a "transformation"; in the study of physics (or thermodynamics), it is defined as "a measure of the amount of energy unavailable for work during a natural process,"[81] or a "measure of the disorganization or degradation of the universe, resulting in a decrease in available energy."[82] I show that entropy serves as a metaphor for the coming-into-being of Toews's protagonist, Nomi Nickel; it is a measure of the grotesque disintegration of her world in which her family has fallen apart. Entropy stands for Nomi's inability, because of the strict Mennonite community of which she is a member, to "convert" her energy and love of life into a path to subjectivity.

Toews confounds the identity of her narrator through entropy. I consider the different elements that come into play in the narrative strategy of the grotesque. Humour, for example, creates an oppositional response in readers through attraction and repulsion, and thereby confuses readers' perception of the narrator's identity. When Toews's humorous grotesque creates a category of confusion for readers, it becomes

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[81] "Entropy," *Random House Dictionary*, 1988 ed.

[82] "Entropy," *Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 1998 ed.

clear, as I will show, that the novel outwits the hierarchy of order over disorder (and vice versa). As well, I will rely on Jennifer L. Holden-Kirwan's study of subjectivity in Toni Morrison's writing in order to question the difference between what Holden-Kirwan describes as 'no-self' and what I maintain is, in Toews's novel (and the other literature of the grotesque examined here), the confounding of identity through narrative device. In other words, Nomi ("no-me") is not a character without a self: my approach enables readers to view Nomi's identity as confounded, rather than merely unified or negated.

Nomi Nickel, a sixteen year old Mennonite in her last year of high school, is the main character and narrator of *A Complicated Kindness*. She tells her story from the small border town of East Village in Manitoba where she lives with her father Ray, during the seventies and eighties. Like Coady's character Bridget Murphy, Nomi encounters serious difficulties and obstacles as she tries to move into adulthood. The Mennonite belief systems of her community do not encourage the kind of thinking predominant in Nomi's own family, namely the questioning of one's own standing within one's faith. Nomi tries to understand the complexities, paradoxes, and hypocrisies of her faith, and her own place within it, despite the pressures of her community and its power to intervene--or meddle--in Nomi's and her father's affairs. The results of her attempts at introspection, however, are often disastrous. As Nomi's awareness grows and she tries to assert herself, her religious community--and in particular her uncle Hans, the religious leader of the town (whom Nomi and her sister refer to as "the Mouth")--severely reprimands her every action. Nomi's sister Natasha ("Tash") found the lack of freedom of self-expression in the Mennonite community so unbearable that she left Nomi and her

father without saying goodbye. Shortly afterward, Nomi's mother also disappeared, leaving Nomi and her father in a spiritual void, trying to cope with the disintegration of their family as well as attempting to reconcile their faith with the hard and incomprehensible blows life has dealt them.

Hanging over Nomi as she tries to "come into her own" and develop/possess herself, are some major threats that prevent her from clearly achieving subjectivity: she feels that the only future her town offers her is a position at the Happy Family Farms abattoir (102), lopping the heads of chickens. To dream of an alternative future is to risk being reproached by the community (209), or at worst, being shunned and excommunicated. Images of the slaughter of chickens and the notion of Nomi's possible career at the abattoir recur throughout Nomi's narrative. Indeed, one of her strongest memories of her mother, Trudie, is one in which they stood together watching an eight-year-old decapitate chickens. While the boy "was doing this awful botch job on a chicken, hacking away at its neck, not doing it right at all," he yells at the chickens to escape, to "Fly away idiot. Don't make me do this" (3). The boy's attitude that, in a grotesque logic, the victims of his actions should save themselves from something their executor doesn't want to--but must--do, reflects Nomi's understanding of the severe punishment the community inflicts in the name of God on its members who don't abide by the "law" (44).

Nomi's story illuminates the clash between what is preached in her Mennonite religion and the impossibility for some of the community members, such as Nomi and her family, to live by it. By the end of the novel, Nomi's story is an essay she writes to

her teacher and entitles: "*for the way things could have been*" (242). Her story, therefore, is told from a peculiar position: Nomi is in transit, residing in between what once was and what might be if only she could find the means to move into another state of consciousness "where the story begins and takes on a life of its own and all you have to do is close your eyes and give in and let go and give in and let go and go and go and go" (100). She remains trapped in a passive state, waiting for something to happen, such as the return of her family members, and unable to control and change her situation. This passivity is one of the elements that prevent her from achieving subjectivity. As narrator, though, Nomi is in a middle state: she is not entirely passive for she actively tells her story of her quest for her identity, with questions and possibilities to fuel her mind. However, passivity constantly lures her into submission: she cannot cope with the idea of what might have been, or the possibility that her mother is dead, so she turns to drugs and her "imagination" to block out what she cannot deal with (54). "Somehow," writes Nomi, "all the problems of the world manage to get into our town but not the strategies to deal with them. We pray. And pray and pray and pray" (53). In East Village, Nomi recounts, death is not only a way of life for the farm animals. For the townspeople, who thrive on denial, existentially, it is the reason for life itself. In Mennonite religion, says Nomi, "carnage has a way of creeping up on you" (2).

Nomi finds herself at odds, however, with the reverence for death shared by the townspeople. Like the inevitable end for the chickens she watches go to slaughter, Nomi feels that there is no escape from her fate. She suffers, however, from the awareness she has that there exists a *possibility* of an array of choices for her own ending, and for

the next stage of her life. The problem is that no one in Nomi's milieu will confirm the existence of possible paths or alternate endings (1). Meanwhile, the threat of a future in the abattoir looms and the laissez-faire attitude of fatalism beckons: "what the hell will it matter to me" Nomi says, "while I'm snapping tiny necks and chucking feathery corpses onto a conveyor belt . . ." (1-2).

Endings, in fact, are the only certainty Nomi carries with her. Her father, she writes, "tells me that life is filled with promise but I think he means the promise of an ending because so far I haven't been able to put my finger on any other" (4). In the meantime, she remains trapped in a town she considers no place, waiting to see if her sister and mother will come home. Due to the breakdown of her family unit, and feeling rejected, uncertain, and responsible for remaining loyal to the father she loves, Nomi suffers from a loss of "positive" energy to create a strong sense of self. "If we could get out of this town things might be better but we can't because we're waiting for Trudie and Tash to come back. It's been three years so far" (4). While she waits, however, the energy she used to have as a child that was normally accessible to her in order for her to feel a sense of self (4, 209) is still present, but inaccessible. Nomi is either not encouraged to think about who she is (152), not allowing herself to think about who she is because the reality is too painful to bear (146), or she does not know who to turn to for guidance in her quest for her identity, such as when she when she attempts to pray to God: "Dear God." Nomi says to herself. "I don't know what I want or who I am. Apparently you do. Um . . . that's great. Never mind" (100). As in an entropic process, therefore, Nomi cannot convert what she had of herself originally--before the breakdown

of her family began--back into something positive with which she can grow as she enters adulthood. During the process of entering adulthood and while imagining the "ending" her father speaks of, Nomi's sense of self degrades. She cannot reverse or arrest this degradation, which is the introduction of disorder into her life, because she is waiting for Trudie and Tash to return (a suspension of her path to subjectivity); her community does not encourage her to develop in the ways she feels appropriate for herself (repression); the pain of her situation is too traumatic to bear (denial); and because any empowering tools at her disposal through the community, such as prayer, are ineffectual, because she has lost her faith and cannot strengthen and renew it through questioning, which her community regards as heresy. Nomi thus becomes, in entropic terms, "unavailable."[83] She turns to drugs and steadily heads for a breakdown (208, 228-229) after shaving her head, wearing dark and excessive make-up, losing her boyfriend, and getting expelled from her school (209).

Throughout her spiral into self-destruction, Nomi continuously "measures," in a sense, the loss of herself through grotesque images, many of which have to do with blood (2, 25). "My period started the day after Trudie left which means I've bled thirty-six times since they've been gone" (4), she states. Similarly, Nomi recounts how she senses that the town suppresses her voice: "There's an invisible force that exerts a steady pressure on our words like a hand to an open, spurting wound" (4). The grotesque in Toews's novel, therefore, appears through images that centre on blood, vomit, disease, and graphic details about the killing of animals, as well as through

[83] Paradoxically, as a narrator, Nomi is of course "available" to the reader. I refer to and attempt to outline the "process" of her path to subjectivity here.

events that are both intriguing and repulsive to readers. When Nomi, for example, watches a group of men slaughter a pig, the scene's grotesque aesthetic commences with a description of the butchering of the animal, but it continues to build when Toews shows the absurdity of the situation and its contribution to Nomi's self-destruction. A child of a tourist is made to watch the slaughter against his or her will and while the child screams, Nomi wryly observes that the "men's feet were making red tracks all over the gravel but I guess a little blood helps to keep the dust down sometimes" (215). Obviously unable to witness the scene a moment longer, Nomi does not narrate how it disturbs her, but rather shows, after a graphic description of events, how absurd and demoralizing she finds this "normal" scene in her community. With the child still screaming, Nomi merely says: "I gave myself an assignment: Ride my bike no hands from one end of town to the other end of town with no stopping and if cars come, tough" (215).

A disturbing opposition between order and disorder reigns in Nomi's narrative. While she spirals into self-destruction (both through herself and as a result of her community's influence) and her identity becomes obscured to herself and to readers, Nomi's subjectivity paradoxically becomes clearer. Nomi's path to self-destruction (through drugs and the disconnection of personal ties to the people in her town) and her town's denial of her (her ejection from school, and ultimately, her excommunication) affirm something of Nomi's subjectivity. While she waits with her father for the return of her mother and sister, and for some kind of normalcy in her life through their hoped-for presence (208), she narrates her story from a middle state. Nomi puts her life on hold

and also submits to having her passage into subjectivity blocked by her home community, a place where one has to take sides: ". . . that's the thing about this town--there's no room for in between. You're either in or you're out" (10). Yet, Nomi falls in between--she cannot leave like her sister and mother, and neither can she stay because she needs to know who she is and yet cannot find answers from where she stands "stuck in the middle of a story with no good ending" (194).

Toews's novel shares the device of humour with *Strange Heaven*, as it does with Gowdy's writing, as well as Munro's. In the novel, humour functions to accent the clash of the grotesque in the response of readers: Nomi's tale becomes, through this device, simultaneously alarming and compelling. Entropy is a disturbing metaphor for Nomi's state because it is troubling to read about her life going to waste as it does in the hypocritical town where getting a library card spells existential misfortune (120, 165) but joining groups of teenagers to drink and have sex is "typical and status quo" (120). Toews's grotesque treatment of Nomi's subjectivity through entropy creates ambivalence in readers. Indeed, the function of humour in the grotesque is well documented by Steig, Kayser, Northey, and by Thomson who writes that "there is almost always a comic element in the grotesque," the comic being "in opposition to and in conflict with something incompatible with it" (50-51).[84]

Throughout Toews's novel, humour almost denies the grotesque because for readers, it brings enjoyment to the terrible and distasteful circumstances surrounding a young girl's loss of self. Thomson suggests, for example, that the comic may "undercut"

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[84] John Ruskin was the first to characterize the juxtaposition of the "sportive" (playful or humorous) and the "terrible" in the grotesque in *Stones of Venice*, as outlined by Bernard McElroy (12).

readers' responses to the disturbing aspect of the grotesque, that perhaps "the grotesque does serve to bring the horrifying and disgusting aspects of existence to the surface, there to be rendered less harmful by the introduction of a comic perspective" (59). But Toews's grotesque humour, like Coady's, renders more forceful the impact of the grotesque because in the situations in which Toews combines the comic with the disturbing, humour has the effect of making things appear out of place and absurd, like the terrible smiles some of Nomi's family members make when they are on the brink of insanity or some tragic life decision (9, 52, 94). The destabilizing effect of Nomi's humorous descriptions of what she views as an absurd world confounds the grasp readers have of Nomi's identity. It is hard to gauge what she really thinks or feels because she distances readers from knowledge of herself through the contradiction of grotesque humour. This effect is one in which readers become shocked or repulsed, surprised or curious by the combination created within them of attraction and repulsion. Like Gregor Samsa's nightmarish situation in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, or Flannery O'Connor's witty killer the Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," humour combines with the horrifying in *A Complicated Kindness* to make the question of who the narrator is all the more mystifying for readers. Thomson, moreover, writes of the incongruity of humour in Swift's grotesque that "One might speculate, indeed, whether the comic element does not in effect make the whole thing even more shocking, even more difficult to stomach" (5).

Nomi's humorous and grotesque description of Trudie eagerly applying herself to the care of the diseased leg of an elderly woman provides an example of how Nomi's

narration disorients readers from a sense of Nomi's self as her world begins to fall apart. Nomi tells of how her mother took on a job nursing a woman's bad leg. She compassionately emphasizes the absurdity of the woman's *raison d'être* revolving around the decay of her limb, before raising the subject of the crisis of faith in her family, her community's negative response to it, and her own resulting crisis of consciousness:

> Mrs. Klippenstein's left leg was a thing of dark beauty. Large and shiny purple, with scales. She had an open sore, just below the knee, that would never heal. It oozed night and day, like Vesuvius, and her life revolved around its maintenance. My mom liked to help and really seemed to enjoy working with gauze and tape. (163)

In awe of the limb and its "dark beauty," Nomi suddenly turns to the absurd circumstances in her family that occur during the time of her visits to Mrs. Klippenstein. Things are beginning to decay, like Mrs. Klippenstein's leg, in a series of motions that Nomi is powerless to stop.

Nomi and her father constantly show their vulnerability through the efforts they make to protect themselves from intolerable pain, as though they've gone into battle with an unknown, more powerful foe: "Ray has exceptionally large glasses," for example, "like an underwater mask, as if he never knows when he'll have to do some welding or shield himself from a solar eclipse" (27). In this sense, Nomi and Ray have already suffered the loss of the departure of their family members and their knowledge of this privation now fuels a fear of possible future loss, a fear of the endless minutes in a day, a fear of the community's role in driving out their own family members. As Nomi, seeking

a reprieve from the pain of missing her mother and sister, begins to turn to drugs and the male company of a young man called Travis, her father attempts to fulfil his responsibilities and talk to Nomi about, as he puts it, "where Nomi's going" (28). But he is as incapable of positive action as Nomi is; the two are lost and confused. Like so many of Nomi's analogies, she compares their bewilderment to a physical wound:

> I reached out and patted his head slowly. It was a weird thing to do. He lifted his hand and put it on mine and we held our two hands there together on the side of his head, near his ear, as though we were attempting to prevent blood loss while waiting for an ambulance to arrive. Then after a while I said Nomi's going in the house and he didn't let go of my hand right away. Like we were in a crappy play and he'd missed his cue. (28)

The despairing likelihood of a future that leads to a position at the abattoir and the sense of hopelessness that occurs when faced with forces Nomi and her father cannot overcome are all lines of measurement of the positive energy (dreams, aspirations, love) that Nomi and Ray cannot transform and divert into happiness, healthiness, or a promising vision of the future.

Entropy represents the measure of the decay of personal power during the crisis in the Nickel family. As the important connections to the present and future degrade, in other words, so too do Nomi's and her father's drive to determine or modify their life's direction and outcome. Toews introduces entropy through Nomi's father, Ray, a mathematician. Nomi comments on how her father, for example, to distract himself from the pain of the disappearance of his wife, fiddles with his "isotope material, finding

comfort in the stability that's created from decay" (164). As entropy is "a measure of disorder or randomness,"[85] entropy in the novel points to the clash of order and disorder that Toews creates, in what I argue is a narrative strategy, by consistently pairing "decay" (disorder) with "stability" (order) so as to confound identity in the representation of Nomi Nickel.

In *Entropy and Art*, Rudolf Arnheim points to the presence of disorder in art, such as depictions of the "untidy scenes of social criticism in the generation of Hogarth" in the eighteenth century (10-11). He writes of entropy, "If during the last century it served to diagnose, explain, and deplore the degradation of culture, it now provides a positive rationale for . . . the pleasures of chaos" (11-12). Arnheim explicates, in his text, the function of order vis à vis comprehension:

> Order is a necessary condition for anything the human mind is to understand. Arrangements such as the layout of a city or building, a set of tools, a display of merchandise, the verbal exposition of facts or ideas, or a painting or piece of music are called orderly when an observer or listener can grasp their overall structure and the ramification of the structure in some detail. Order makes it possible to focus on what is alike and what is different, what belongs together and what is segregated. When nothing superfluous is included and nothing indispensable left out, one can understand the interrelation of the whole and its parts, as well as the hierarchic scale of

[85] 18 Nov. 2004 <http://www.panspermia.org/seconlaw.htm>.

> importance and power by which some structural features are dominant, others subordinate. (1)

Certainly, orderly structure is a prerequisite to understanding. Order is tangible: that is, it is something a person can grasp and from it gain some kind of meaning--in contrast to the unfamiliar, the irrational, or the disorderly. In this study, for example, I apply a theory of the grotesque--that is, I apply a structure to the aesthetic of the grotesque--in order to identify and frame elements of the disorderly. The theory of the grotesque I put to use here, therefore, is meant to permit readers to "grasp," as Arnheim states, "overall structure and the ramification of the structure in some detail" (1). Arnheim, however, makes an important point: order helps one to differentiate between things that are either the same or different. As well, he says, order makes sense of hierarchies--those things that are "dominant" and "subordinate" (1).

However, I have shown with the middle voice that in fiction there occur important moments in the narrative wherein hierarchy is not apparent. For example, if there is no dominant feature of agency in Nomi's movement to posit herself as a subject, then hierarchy and order become impotent as categorizing structures through which readers might understand the characterization of Nomi. When the narrative strategy is one of the grotesque where there is no dominant element, no dynamic of power with which to differentiate between the opposites of dominant and subordinate, order becomes an insufficient "condition" for enlightenment. As well, as noted earlier, Harpham argues that confusion leads to innovation. For example, David Z. Rich, who writes on crisis theory,

states that "all wars develop originality of thought . . ." (66). Indeed, Arnheim focuses on a contradiction in the sciences between order and disorder in nature[86]:

> Modern science, then, maintains on the one hand that nature, both organic and inorganic, strives towards a state of order and that man's action are governed by the same tendency. It maintains on the other hand that physical systems move towards a state of maximum disorder. (8)

Contradiction, Arnheim duly notes, is not perfection, but "perfection," after all, is "a standstill" that "has often been viewed with justified discomfort, and the definitive order of utopias and heaven smacks inevitably of boredom" (56). Disorder, in Toews's narrative, arouses the interest of readers and enlightens in a way that order and structure do not. Like the contradiction Arnheim notes in science and human behaviour, Nomi aims for order but in reality exists within a sphere of confusion. In Toews's entropic metaphor, a constant tension prevails. Nomi attempts to seek order in her family life and to privilege presence over absence when, in fact, she can achieve neither of these goals.

Entropy is the second law of thermodynamics. Rich, in his linguistic study on crisis theory, writes that while the notion of entropy was originally developed through "the functioning of physical systems and their eventual breakdown," the topic has garnered interest in other domains (80 n. 6). The importance of the relationship between the first law (energy) and the second (entropy as disorder), therefore, extends beyond physics,

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[86] "Physical systems," as I understand it here, are systems that exist in nature. Physics, of course, is the study of energy, matter, force, etc., that exist in nature.

as an examination of Toews's novel and its use of entropy as metaphor demonstrates.[87] Metaphorically, entropy and the law of physics in *A Complicated Kindness* point to a "turning" in Nomi's consciousness. Nomi goes through an irreversible transformation from one state of self to another as the bonds that previously defined who she is disintegrate. Striving for a path to subjectivity as she enters adulthood, Nomi has only a plenitude of disorder and absence with which to try and define, and re-define, herself. "Half of our family, the better-looking half, is missing," she begins her story (1). The loss of her mother, her sister, and eventually her father, confound Nomi's identity because it was through her bonds with her family that Nomi understood and shaped her sense of self. She remembers feeling at peace when the sounds and smells of her family surrounded her; with her family gone, she wonders *who she will be* when she, too, leaves the town (246).

In a narrative strategy of the grotesque, Nomi tells her story through a paradox: she gains a sense of self by narrating her loss of self. Like her father, Nomi loses her

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[87] Because of its multiple meanings, ambiguity, and paradoxical nature, the "semantic minefield" (75) of entropy has long since appealed to thinkers in many fields outside of the physical sciences, write Carl H. Builder and Gabriele U. Menke. Their study offers a clear historical evolution of the term, but is a curious reflection on entropy, machines, and the fate of humanity. It pursues what John Limon points out in his work, *The Place of Fiction in the Time of Science,* that: "entropy tells us that the world is disunifying and, by extension, dehumanizing" (169). Entropy is viewed as a gradual movement to disorder (hence, the hypothesis that the world, as an entropic process, will eventually end in some way, such as is evoked in Pynchon's short story "Entropy"). Although the process of entropy "results" in order (when, for example a hot body transfers its heat to a cool body and both objects end up as the same temperature—the probable and orderly consequence of the transfer of heat) entropy (the disorder or degradation that occurs during a process) can only increase. (See note 89, an example of entropy in thermodynamics.) As one author on entropy states, "According to the old view, the second law was viewed as a 'law of disorder'. The major revolution in the last decade is the understanding with an expanded view of thermodynamics, that the spontaneous production of order from disorder is the expected consequence of basic laws." 12 Nov. 2004 <http://www.entropylaw.com/>. In other words, while energy is eventually distributed in its most predictable form, this results only from the random and disordered movement of particles.

power to act. As in the phenomenon of entropy, she experiences a loss of energy during the process of her transformation into a passive/active agent who, in recounting a denial of herself, thereby posits herself simultaneously. Unlike Ray, however, who cannot think about his loss or face it in any way, Nomi remains actively involved with the loss of her sense of self, as her narration attests. Entropy is grotesque: it signals disorder clashing with order, and more dramatically, the disintegration in Nomi's life of the familiar, the concrete, and the rational. When she no longer has the order of "presence"--of her family members, and even the familiarity of the family's furniture, which her father keeps selling--to hold onto, she faces conflict. It is within the heart of her conflict of self that Nomi narrates her story.

Entropy designates impending doom. This quality of the process points to the grotesque ambiance that hangs over Toews's novel. On the one hand, entropy signals an eventual return to order: when a hot object is placed in contact with a cold object, heat is transferred to the cold object and eventually, both objects take on the same temperature, and the frenetic exchange of heat particles ceases to be. Nomi Nickel narrates her story through the evocation of entropy, a process where the exchange of energy ends, in a closed system such as her Mennonite community, in its most probable state: the abattoir, uniformity, even excommunication. Nomi's identity becomes confounded in a paradox: the more she questions to try and posit herself, the less she becomes attached to her community. And the expectation of her community is an existential sameness between Nomi and the other members that would ultimately spell doom for Nomi. Once she ceases to exchange energy between herself and the people

she is in contact with, as she does when she talks openly or writes or questions, order will resume. This order, however, signals the death of Nomi for it means the death of difference.[88]

In physics, the first law states that energy can be converted from one form to another without loss; the second, the law of entropy, states that all energy can be converted into thermal energy (heat), but in a process that cannot be reversed: "it is not possible to convert the heat back fully in its original form."[89] Entropy is a measure of

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[88] In *The Place of Fiction in the Time of Science*, John Limon contests the use of science as metaphor in literary analysis because he believes that writers and critics seek in the language of science something they cannot obtain: a "nonmetaphoric" translation of the world, or a "master metaphor" (170). Writers and critics, Limon maintains, desire a way into reality through the sciences, a discourse external to and different from that of fiction (170). He views entropy in the writing of Pynchon (whose early short story is entitled "Entropy"), for example, as a signifier that exists only in the text, and that cannot gain meaning through science (science being an external, non-related discourse and one that is not viable to metaphor); the root of the problem being, he states, "the recalcitrant metaphoricity of science *in literature*" (171). Limon also expresses bewilderment at the sheer number of critical articles that use science over any other subject to explicate Pynchon's short story. "Entropy explains nothing in the text because our sense of what it means comes directly *from* the text. We have not joined an independent discourse" (171). In my own use of entropy in *A Complicated Kindness*, I do not view the science behind the meaning of entropy as "a discipline foreign to literature" (Limon 172) but as interdisciplinary and thus related. Physics, as much as any other discipline, lends itself, in my view, to metaphor (and thus to meaning). Furthermore, entropy in Toews's novel can be read as a way into the lives of Nomi and her father, Ray, but so can many other significant tropes in the novel. In my analysis of Toews's narrative strategy, entropy (as a metaphor for the physical process of entropy in science) is the principal strategy of the *grotesque* that elucidates Nomi's state of being. Rosi Braidotti, moreover, in "Mothers, Monsters, and Machines," sees women, biology, and technology as "conceptually interrelated, there can not be only one correct connection but, rather, many, heterogeneous and potentially contradictory ones" (59). Moreover, Griffiths observes that "One of the basic principles of the grotesque is the entropic nature of the universe: humanity does not remain discrete from the inanimate world but instead, as both Bakhtin and Kayser insist, becomes indistinguishable from it" (42).

[89] 18 Nov. 2004. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_law_of_thermodynamics>. A classic example of this irreversible process is if one dropped a hot stone into a bucket of cool water. The stone, through cooling, would eventually take on the temperature of the water (and the water would eventually reach the same temperature as the stone). The loss of heat in the process is a loss of energy; the stone cannot revert back to its original hot temperature without some kind of outside intervention. Entropy is the measure of the energy that is unavailable in this process. "During this process, the entropy of the system increases. If you know the initial temperatures of the stone and the water, and the final temperature of the water, you can quantify the entropy increase . . ." In simple terms, "The second law is a straightforward law of physics with the consequence that, in a closed system, you can't finish any real physical process with as much useful energy as you had to start with--some is always wasted. 18 Nov. 2004

unavailable energy. It is a law of order and disorder wherein entropy is random movement that cannot be put into order without some "external influence."[90] In physics, the law shows that in a controlled environment (called a "closed system") entropy cannot decrease, which is another way of saying, as one definition of entropy states, that "*things never organize themselves.*"[91] On the day that "marked the beginning of the end" for Nomi and her family, when her mother, before her disappearance asks her husband "where everything had gone" (110), Nomi's father can only find comfort in the calculation of the breakdown of isotopes. Nomi cannot bring order back to her family; she can only assess the situation from her position, a position of helplessness. Entropy is random movement, it is disorder. When there is disorder in a closed environment, as in Toews's Mennonite community, things cannot organize themselves into order without outside help. When there is no outside influence or guidance, what is broken cannot become mended, as an explanation of the physical process describes:

> When a stone falls on earth, its kinetic energy is converted into heat, i.e. it becomes random movements of earth particles. The second law says that this random movement will never become ordered again. For example, the random movement will never become synchronized to throw the stone back in the air: the heat energy will not revert to the original kinetic energy. (92)

<http://www.panspermia.org/seconlaw.htm>. Entropy is a law of thermodynamics (the relationship in physics between heat and other kinds of energy) and a basic law of physics.

[90] 18 Nov. 2004 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_law_of_thermodynamics>.

[91] 18 Nov. 2004 <http://www.entropylaw.com/>.

[92] 18 Nov. 2004 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_law_of_thermodynamics>.

Entropy, in fact, indicates a paradox of a "natural" disorder--that in the scheme of things, disorder exists. It is randomness that cannot be reorganized into order without aid of external force. In *A Complicated Kindness*, entropy stands for the degradation of order and happiness in the lives of Nomi and her father. During their painful experiences of the loss of their family and of the trust they placed in the notion of family, Nomi and her father become caught in a vacuum where they cannot convert their energy back into something constructive. Ray spends his free time at the dump attempting to organize the endless piles of garbage in a way that to him "makes sense" (158). Together, Nomi and Ray live in a town Nomi's mother once described as the "world's most non-progressive community" (11)--a rigidly-ruled town that "exists in the world based on the idea of it not existing in the world" (48).

East Village boasts a main street that leads to "two dirt fields on either end" (131), it is a "conundrum" Nomi figures her mother must have recognized, for did Trudie not see, Nomi asks, ". . . the conundrum of wanting to raise her kids to be free and independent and of knowing that that's just the kind of kid a town like this chews up and spits out every day like happy hour?" (245). These circumstances are some of the random elements, beginning with the founding of the Mennonite way of life five centuries ago by Menno Simons (5),[93] that have come into conflict for Nomi. Order cannot be restored or created due to the lack of resources--both physical and spiritual--that Nomi

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[93] Nomi describes Menno Simon's religious sect as "the most embarrassing sub-sect of people to belong to if you're a teenager. . . .We are supposed to be cheerfully yearning for death and in the meantime, until that blessed day, our lives are meant to be facsimiles of death or at least the dying process" (5).

and her father have at hand.[94] Nomi brings the second law of thermodynamics to life: in her closed system in her Mennonite community, she becomes caught in a process she can't finish with as much available energy she had to start with--much of what made her who she was, in the best sense of the term, must go to waste.

Thus, in a scene where Nomi, looking and feeling like a wreck, goes to the general store and speaks with the woman who works there, Toews illustrates how Nomi is unable to access help from the members of her community. The townspeople can only point to religion as a source of guidance, but it is a religious fundamentalism that Nomi can't relate to without detriment to herself:

> She hadn't seen me in church lately. I know, I said, I'm sorry. And I was sorry.
>
> When she looked at me she saw a child surrounded by flames screaming.
>
> And that must have been hard for her.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Nomi, she said. May I make a suggestion? I said of course she could. May I suggest you start with Matthew? she asked.

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[94] Arnheim's study of entropy and art points to two helpful definitions of disorder. The first, by W. Köhler, refers to disorder as "physical states in which a multiplicity of elements pursue mostly independent paths but, for short times, come into physical connection." This latter definition underlines the conflict Nomi comes up against in her community—a conflict that creates upheaval in her state of being and sense of identity. The second definition, by James K Feibleman, states that "Disorder depends on the random dispersion of limited orders" (*Entropy and Art* 13). I include it here to emphasize that randomness and disorder are the same thing in entropy—they are the opposite of organization. Yet there is a sustained contradiction in entropy: order eventually is restored when, as my earlier example states, a hot stone becomes the same temperature as the cool water it was dropped into; yet, despite this move to order—to a temperature that is equal--the entropy of the process has not decreased. Order is "dispersed" in a way that both order and disorder exist.

> That's probably a good idea, I said. Thank you. She seemed so happy then, I felt good about sticking around and talking to her. I wanted what she had. I wanted to know what it really felt like to think you were saving someone's life. (186-87)

When the woman in the store asks Nomi about her father, the language is not a common one between them. Her father is working on carbons and thermodynamics, Nomi tells her, "His beloved second law" (187). The woman doesn't understand and Nomi tries again:

> He's hooked on extremely unstable carbons, I said.
>
> Ohhhh, she said.
>
> And entropy.
>
> Is that right? she asked. (187)

The conversation ends when Nomi and the woman nod "together in kindly clued-out unison," with the woman asking if she might pray for Nomi. However, even the language of good intentions is incomprehensible to Nomi, despite her own law to "love thy neighbour." Nomi's personal doctrine paradoxically places her miles apart from the people who might have helped her to feel a sense of herself. The Church, her school, her teachers, and her family--all of these elements of her tightly-knit community that have the potential to do so--do not or cannot aid Nomi in converting her life-energy into a sense of self. There is an incompatibility of personal and public law that is irreconcilable between Nomi and her community. Like Peter Haidu's notion of "desubjectivity," where "persons whose subjection to the state has not brought them the

active subjectivity implied by that subjection, the ability to act accordingly to the values of the inculcating ideology that creates subjectivity" (297), Nomi's community and its faith impede the development of her subjectivity.

What makes it possible for an individual to designate his or her path to subjectivity? What are the elements that make the construction of an individual consciousness impossible or obscure? Holden-Kirwan's article "Looking into the Self that is No Self: An Examination of Subjectivity in *Beloved*" maintains that subjectivity is built and maintained through connections such as family relationships--daughterhood or motherhood, for example. She cites the example of the character of Baby Suggs, an African-American whose every "opportunity to possess subjectivity is squelched" through slavery, a condition that "denies Baby Suggs friendship, motherhood, wifehood, sisterhood, and daughterhood" (6). Similarly, Holden-Kirwan writes that Seth--a central figure in the novel--has lost her mother and thus can "never achieve subjectivity through daughterhood" (7). Characters in Morrison's novel, she maintains, thus attempt to posit themselves as subjects through "the maternal," and "through the gaze of the other"; in both cases, Morrison's characters cannot position themselves as subjects in a system that designates them as objects and commodities (7).

While the subject of slavery in *Beloved* brings with it complex considerations that I will not discuss or examine here, Holden-Kirwan's study suggests important issues in relation to the subjectivity of Nomi Nickel and even of Coady's Bridget Murphy: is it possible not to recognize or possess a self? As well, is identity founded through

associations that come as a result of such bonds as daughterhood or motherhood?[95] Holden-Kirwan writes that when Baby Suggs is finally freed from slavery, she "must go through a process of acquainting herself with a 'self that was no self'"[96] (6). Is "no self" a real possibility as long as a person breathes? Can oppression completely strip a person of the identity of her being? Can a person attain subjectivity without the frames of reference of family, for example, when family is what she once had and family bonds were what once largely defined her? Again, while the example of slavery is a complicated one, I am not sure that a self denied is the same thing as "no self." The language of negation (*not-I*), double identity, confusion, and non-resolution, leave open what the term "no self" does not. In *A Complicated Kindness*, I would argue that, despite the implication of a name that rings of "no me," Nomi Nickel is not a being with "no self"; rather, when she has, like her father, undergone a loss of connection to family, ancestry, and culture, her identity is confounded.

Nomi's narration reveals her identity through denial. What Nomi Nickel, Ray Nickel, and Bridget Murphy have in common is that they are characters who share a strange understanding in a moment of their lives when they realize that suffering is a way to feel alive. Nomi, for example, has a blood smear on the wall of her bedroom that she has left there since an accident on her bike some time before. Ironically, looking at it gives her hope, for she is "reminded that I was, at that very moment, not bleeding from

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[95] Here, I think of the epitaphs on tombstone that sum up in few words a deceased person's identity in their lifetime: in memory of . . . father, brother, loving husband. . . In Morrison's novel, only the word/name "Beloved" appears (184) without any other qualifier that might give the observer a clue as to her identity.

[96] Holden-Kirwan quotes page 140 in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*.

my face" (89). In the same manner of (negative) logic, Nomi tells her boyfriend that it is the "dying part that makes me feel alive" (125). Similarly, her father is able to make sense of the world and "come alive" when bad things happen to him: "His confusion lifts" (160), Nomi tells readers, when something occurs that would normally shock and confuse others. The oppression of Nomi, or the negation of Nomi, brings about, in a paradoxical process, the affirmation of who she is--that is, what her desires are and what she believes she needs. In other words, negation of self in *A Complicated Kindness* paradoxically affirms what Nomi does want, what she likes, and what her views are on different issues--in short, the things that distinguish Nomi from anyone else. Moreover, as I will examine further, the Mennonite community's absolute denial of Nomi as a person, her excommunication, is what, in fact, posits Nomi as a subject for both her father and herself.[97]

In other words, the excommunication of Nomi is the ultimate denial by her community of her person. When her uncle Hans and his wife come to announce to Nomi and her father that Nomi's excommunication has been "determined" (235), Nomi becomes, in the eyes of the townspeople, a non-subject. Yet she continues to tell her story, addressing her essay about herself and her people to one of her teachers (who, it turns out, was partly responsible for the excommunication and the subsequent departure of her mother). When Nomi's mother was excommunicated, she left town, Nomi believes, because Trudie knew that Ray could not be two things at once--he could not

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[97] However, even after Nomi's excommunication, the status of Nomi's narration does not change: it is still the doubled act of story-telling in which Nomi's identity is revealed while it is simultaneously concealed.

choose between her and the Church, could not denounce the woman he loved or leave the authority of the Church that could "someday, forgive his wife and secure their future together in paradise, for all time" (194). As well, Nomi figures that her mother knew her daughter needed her father to stay with her, so she left without him (194). However, Nomi recognizes, more than anything, that these are all only possibilities (244), speculations in her search for a rationale. In contrast to the unstable ground beneath her feet concerning her mother's disappearance, Nomi's own excommunication fills her with resolve and clarity about how she feels about her faith: "I thought about Menno Simons," she states, "and what kind of childhood he must have had to want to lead people into a barren place to wait out the Rapture and block out the world and make them really believe that looking straight through a person, like she wasn't there, a person they'd loved like crazy all their lives, was the right thing to do" (242). In this way, Nomi lets go of the faith that had always accompanied her throughout her lifetime, the belief system that used to make sense of who she was and where her place was in the world.

When Nomi was little, a story her mother used to tell her about the shunning of some of the former members of the town used to confirm her own understanding of right and wrong, of good and bad (44). If people didn't abide by the rules, she used to think, they would be "denounced" with God as the "ultimate punisher, he got no satisfaction from it. It hurt him, but it had to be done." (44). But when Nomi's mother evokes the possibility of forgiveness, Nomi cannot understand the concept at the time and balks at its disorder. "I didn't like that part," she says. "It muddied my crystal-clear waters" (44). No longer a child, Nomi gives up on the logic of opposition where things mutually

exclude one another and where fundamentalism proposes rules that do not allow for contradiction or complication. She gives up her adherence to her town's belief system so that she does not block out the parts of her being that she feels are most authentic: knowing what is right and her capacity to love others.

Thus, Nomi paradoxically posits her own identity once she has been deemed a non-subject when she is able, through intellectualising the act of excommunication and her father's departure shortly thereafter, to situate herself and her loved ones in relation to her faith. Nomi determines who her father, herself, and her family are: people who are not strong enough to change a social belief system; people who are, in fact, obliged to leave in order to do what is right:

> There was something else, too. I'd just been ex-communicated, shunned, banished, exiled, whatever you want to call it. If Ray wanted to keep his faith and stay in town . . . yeah, I'd have been a ghost to him, a kid he loved but couldn't acknowledge. And it was comforting, in a fragile, loss-filled kind of way, to know that Ray had decided to keep the love alive in his imagination, and leave. That's what people around here are forced to do if they aren't strong enough to live without some kind of faith or strong enough to make a stand and change an entire system or overthrow a church. And who of us are that strong anyway? Not the Nickel's, that's for sure. (240-41)

Forgiveness becomes a part of Nomi's subjectivity. She does not blame her family members for leaving; she does not judge herself or her family for not being stronger or

different. Through forgiveness, she sustains opposition: what she is supposed to do and what she is (only) capable of doing.

Her mother had a parable about this kind of contradiction. It is called "the table trick" (45). If your spouse was shunned, and the Church states that you are not permitted to sit at a table with your spouse, you can put "two tables together, with an inch between them, and then put a tablecloth over them" so that it "would seem like you were at the same table . . . but you *wouldn't* be at the same table, so you wouldn't be breaking any rules" (45). Nomi becomes a ghost in her own town, but I believe she performs her own kind of table trick: she claims her middle position by narrating her story and thus subverts her town's intolerance of ambivalence and dichotomy (10). A phantom menace, she is very much present despite the community's desire for certainty regarding the censure of Nomi, her absence, and submission to the law of denial. Like Bernard McElroy's discussion of the divided self where the individual is set against a "patently insane world" (17), Nomi becomes like her mother used to be: "Half in the world, half out" (Toews 12). Part of Nomi realizes her shortcomings; the other part is still dependent upon her bonds with others for its existence. In a way, Nomi is similar to the anti-heroes of modern grotesque literature who, McElroy states, "feel that they are being called upon in some preposterous way to account for themselves before some ominous, irrational power" and who cannot radically shift their own beliefs to accommodate the powers that be (McElroy 25).[98]

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[98] The anti-hero McElroy points to primarily is underground man in Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground* (25).

In a discussion by Charles Taylor about "self-obedience" and austerity--the virtuous cutting away of all superfluous elements that obscure personal strength and freedom--I am reminded of Nomi's Mennonite order and her paradoxical place within it (she both belongs to and does not belong to her community; she can only attempt to locate her self when her religious community makes her helpless, and thus, through her dependency, self-less). Taylor cites Rousseau's advocacy of inner strength that does not rely on external, material influence: "'L'homme est très fort quand il se contente d'être ce qu'il est; il est très faible quand il veut s'élever au-dessus de l'humanité. (When man is content to be himself he is strong indeed; when he strives to be more than man he is weak indeed)'" (359). In other words, synthesizes Taylor, "It is our dependence on others, on appearances, on opinion which multiplies our wants, and thus in turn makes us even more dependent" (359). Taylor's discussion, I would say, in part epitomizes Nomi's dilemma with the faith her community upholds--her need to adhere to and thus reinforce it--but also to be free of it in some way. Without some kind of emancipation from her community, Nomi cannot achieve subjectivity, which is to say, she cannot tap into an inner strength that would lead her to a sense of self. When her emancipation materialises through her ex-communication, however, Nomi remains in a middle space. She places herself on the path to subjectivity through her narration, through her articulation of herself as an "I" (and hence for readers), but becomes a ghost in the eyes of those people she has always known. As well, Nomi remains in a state where possibility reigns. She ends her story recounting that options are open to her as far as

the construction of her identity, but that in the meantime she will wait while she thinks about those possibilities (246).

Even what Nomi approved of in her faith she cannot now convert into energy for herself. Ironically, Mennonites in Russia fled their homeland, Nomi chronicles, to find an environment where they could be free. "All they needed . . . was for people to tolerate their unique *apartness*" (148). The community of East village, however, cannot accord Nomi a place for her own individuality. After a vote, the townspeople agree to pretend that she is dead. Nomi thus remains both alive and dead, and active and passive in this final transformation of her state of being in the novel. Still in her isolated Mennonite town, alone in her house now that her father has left, Nomi upholds the law of entropy: entropy (unavailable energy) can never decrease in a closed system.

Nomi's account of the happy days of the past with her family creates the sense that it has taken years of love and construction for a family to find stability and happiness together, as Nomi's family once had. But the severity of the town, especially after Nomi's uncle, "The Mouth," begins to rule with an iron fist, only takes a comparatively small amount of time to break Nomi's family apart. Nomi herself is excommunicated only a short while after she begins to act out in her desperation to find herself. Nomi's father is happy talking about the science he loved, "even if," Nomi points out, "it was about something breaking down" (111). The day her family crisis becomes real to Nomi, when she overhears her mother cry to her father that they are beginning to lose their daughter, Tash, Nomi is frightened, but then listens to her father's stories of isotopes. How long does she think potassium takes to break down into argon, he asks?

"It takes fifty billion years!" he tells her excitedly, letting her know that collapse leads to stability and that for the most part, stability takes time (111). But Nomi cannot be reassured. She becomes aware that day that her family bonds are breaking apart and that collapsing with them is her sense of self (110). In response to her father she makes light of it, then "realized that I had just laughed the type of laugh my mother often laughed. It was the kind of laugh a person laughs before consuming two or three bottles of Aspirin" (111). In this way, Nomi's mother--even *in absentia*--helps Nomi to see who she is, for she recognizes herself in her mother's half-deranged laugh. However, Nomi's laugh evokes the woman who has no voice, the woman who disappeared mysteriously after demonstrating that she was suffocating to death in the town (146) before being shunned officially. At the time, Nomi prays for a "return" to normalcy, a return to the state of "a normal family again, even with small amounts of desperate laughter" (146). For Nomi, however, artificial mirth means living a lie, and she is incapable of upholding the charade. A real smile, as Nomi says, means that a person has freed herself, as her sister did the day she left for good, flashing:

> A really tender genuine smile that killed me. There was no sarcasm, no faking. I knew that something horrible was going to happen. She'd freed herself. That's what a real smile meant. I knew it. (147)

Instead, Nomi will recognize that she needs to leave in order to claim her subjectivity. In the meantime, she thinks about the possibility of who she will become if she ever finds the means to leave and find, even if it takes fifty billion years, a little stability.

CONCLUSION

Harpham observes that, "the sense of the grotesque arises with the perception that something is illegitimately *in* something else" (11). Harpham's statement is a fascinating and astute assessment of the grotesque in general, yet there is more to the identities at the centre of this study than the notion of one presence overtaking or invading another. There is no sense of containment (as implied by Harpham's prepositions "in") to the doubled selves represented by authors through Grace Marks, Sylvie, Bridget Murphy, Nomi Nickel, and the other characters I have examined. Their sense of identity threatened by a lack of individuality at the core of their consciousness, these characters read as confounded beings.

The critical objective of this study in terms of this narrative phenomenon has been to identify a strategy of the grotesque as it exists in literature, to analyse how it functions in narratives, and to explore why authors might adopt a strategy that undermines so radically the coherent/fixed construction of central fictional subjects. Readers who encounter the problematic representation of narrators understand that, for Atwood, Coady, Gowdy and Toews, their narrating subjects are above all, paradoxical. These authors show that sustained binary opposition lies at the core of paradox. They make paradox possible through the grotesque when they present a narrator who speaks while pervaded by the presence of another. Fictional characterization in the grotesque strategy I study here moves beyond such adjectives as "in flux" or "unstable," and beyond the "postmodern irony that refuses resolution of contraries" demonstrated by

Hutcheon (4).[99] Narrators embody a permanent state of ambiguity and ambivalence when they tell their stories, making of themselves conflicted subjects. In these texts, it is not a question of characters who undergo a change during their experiences or in some way fundamental to their development. Rather, the motivation, agency, and overall subjectivity of Gowdy's characters and their peers are consistently confounded. In lieu of a single consciousness, there are two. In this way, the narrative strategy of the grotesque present in these works of fiction is without precedent. This study, therefore, seeks to offer more than a definition of the grotesque and more than a framework of features of the aesthetic through which fiction may be read by critics and readers. From my recognition of the phenomenon of doubled identities in the narrative strategy of the grotesque I draw a set of properties suited to the reading of ambivalence.

"The most mundane of figures, this metaphor of co-presence, *in*, also harbours the essence of the grotesque, the sense that things that should be kept apart are fused together," writes Harpham (11). Authors Atwood (although her novel is not grotesque as the other works of fiction studied here are), Gowdy, Coady, Munro, and Toews, play on

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[99] Postmodernism, according to Hutcheon, is a "challenge to the humanist notion of the self as coherent" (173). Hutcheon's analysis of Kroetsch's writing, for example, focuses on his "need to challenge humanist notions such as centered identity, coherent subjectivity, and aesthetic originality" (161-62). In contrast, the strategy of the grotesque in the narratives I examine here centers on the representation of subjects. More specifically, the preoccupation of the strategy of the grotesque has to do with the impossibility of portraying a subject as wholly knowable. Instead, subjects are paradoxical, and thus unfailingly doubled. Certainly, the strategy of the grotesque touches on Hutcheon's observations that in Kroetsch's postmodern, there is "no deep, single, stable identity . . ." only "an acknowledged human fiction—comforting but illusory" (173). However, the postmodern play with incoherent subjectivity does not, as do the narratives of the grotesque studied here, present the persistent conundrum: "who is speaking" for the sake of destabilizing the notion of fictional characterization and hence, representation. In fiction of the grotesque, characters narrate themselves into a doubleness of self, grounding the narrative within questions of agency in a way unique in narrative. Furthermore, postmodernism differs from the grotesque strategy analysed here as Hutcheon shows how feminism, in the postmodernist work, searches for "a distinctive gender identity in terms of the paradoxical . . ." (6). Feminism in postmodernism is thus "gender-based" and "gender biased" (164).

the knowledge that "things should be kept apart" in the representation of consciousness. They confound the identity of their narrators when they portray a consciousness that is not distinct or single. The co-presence inherent to the grotesque aesthetic is at the heart of the strategy of these fictional characterizations. Nomi Nickel, for example, searches to secure her selfhood while denied existence outright by her faith community. Nevertheless, she remains a part of the community by hanging on to a past she cannot restore, despite simultaneously harbouring a second, unorthodox presence within her. Gradually, the doubleness in Nomi opens her eyes to the concept of choice and dissent. For Nomi, the past has become illegitimate inside her because she cannot reconcile the person she once was with the state of being she now experiences as her environment degrades. Nomi is at once responsible for this degradation, as she begins to listen to who she must be, and also a passive participant who submits to her destiny. In Coady's novel, Bridget Murphy "finds herself" in a dilemma (pun and ambiguous passivity intended). She must deny her baby but simultaneously recognize how the child she gives up for adoption has merged with her own consciousness. Distinguishing herself from her child but also allowing herself to acknowledge the ways in which the child has made its presence a part of her must become a legitimate act if she is to posit her subjectivity. In Gowdy's story, "We So Seldom Look on Love," the narrator Sandra becomes pervaded by the presence of the deceased beings she makes love to and wholly submits to through her desire. All of these and the other paradoxical subjects examined throughout this work remain within the realm of ambivalence.

At the end of the twentieth century, Coady, Gowdy, and Toews have developed the aesthetic of the grotesque as a narrative strategy. McElroy, referring to the pertinence of the powerful status of the grotesque as both real and yet somehow out of the ordinary, writes that "It is no accident, I think, that the word 'grotesque' came into currency at exactly the time when rationalism and empiricism were assuming an increasingly important role in Western man's address to the world" (6). In an observation echoed by Robertson (71), Thomson views the grotesque as an aesthetic that has strong currency in the twentieth century because it "tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical changes or disorientation" (11). Looking at Canadian fiction of the last thirty to forty years, the grotesque is especially prevalent in the portrayal of disturbing and violent situations that place a narrator's sense of being at risk. Examples are Gail Anderson Dargaatz's *The Cure for Death by Lightening* in which Dargaatz employs the grotesque to portray a young girl's incestuous betrayal by her father while the Second World War rages in another continent; Anne Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* (incest, racism, rape); Hiromi Goto's *Hopeful Monsters* (physical deformity, among other topics); Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (civil war); and Loranne Brown's *The Handmaiden's Daughter* (incest, and the death of a child). What all of these texts share with the literature in this study is that their authors use the grotesque to depict the effects of absurdity and excess on the development of female narrators as subjects. Coady, Gowdy, and Toews, however, have refined the grotesque aesthetic to create an unresolved crisis of consciousness at the level of narration.

What these texts do is ask the question "who is the person behind the telling of a story?" Is the narrator someone whom readers grasp because of her affiliation to others? Are the narrators examined here the persons their community says they must be in order to exist as one of its accepted members? When that community no longer supports one of its members, who do the narrators become once they have lost this affiliation? The grotesque is pertinent for our times because its authors embrace the inherent paradox of the representation of being. Narrators thrive as story-tellers when their very being becomes open to questions, especially questions in which the irresolvable must be embraced in order for meaning to emerge.

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