INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

Hornswogglers, Whangdoodles and other dirty beasts: the comic grotesque in Roald Dahl's writings for children

Maria Szuber
Department of English
McGill University, Montreal
August 1999

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis will be to substantiate the claim that Roald Dahl, the author of humorous writings for children, is simultaneously an avid creator of grotesque fiction. My argument is based on the premise that unless one views Dahl's texts in terms of their grotesque influence, critical evaluation of his work inevitably becomes reduced to a question of taste. A diachronic overview of the term "grotesque" is presented beginning with its delineation of an artistic mode in early Rome to its Rabelaisian extensions during the sixteenth century. The origins of the word are established, and its changing meaning throughout history is examined. A synchronic approach to the study follows, tracing both modern and post-modern theories of the grotesque. Of particular importance to the survey is Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*. By emphasizing the"positive, regenerating, creative" powers of laughter, *Rabelais* comes closest to defining the comic grotesque as embodied in Dahl's fiction. The final portion of the thesis is devoted to an interpretation of such texts as *The Twits*, *George's Marvelous Medicine*, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Dahl's treatment of character, his developmentof plot, and his use of language are discussed in relation to previous theories of the grotesque. A psychological defense of the genre is offered as a conclusion to the study. Ultimately, the grotesque will be viewed in its cathartic role: helping children work

through feelings of oppression in a world governed by adult authority.

Résumé

Le but de cette thèse est de prouver que Roald Dahl, auteur de récits humoristiques pour enfants, est également un créateur de fiction de tradition grotesque. Le point de départ de ma thèse est que, a moins de tenir compte de l'influence du grotesque sur les écrits de Dahl, l'évaluation critique de son œuvre sera inévitablement réduite a une question de goût. Nous présenterons une étude générale diachronique du terme "grotesque", commencent par les implications de ce genre sur le plan artistique dans la Rome antique et montrant son évolution jusqu'aux œuvres Rabelaisiennes au seizième siècle. Nous examinerons les origines du mot et son sens dans l'histoire. Nous étudierons ensuite les théories modernes et post-modernes du grotesque, par une approche synchronique. Nous donnerons une place prépondérante a l'ouvrage, *Rabelais and His World* de Bakhtin. Parce qu'il souligne l'effet "positif, régénérateur et créatif" du rire, Rabelais se rapproche le plus du comique grotesque que l'on trouve dans les romans de Dahl. Enfin, la dernière partie de cette thèse sera consacrée a une interprétation de textes tels que *The Twits*, *George's Marvelous Medicine*, et *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. L'approche de Dahl, en ce qui concerne les personnages, l'intrigue et le choix de langue sera discutée en comparaison avec les théories du grotesque déjà vues. Bref, nous présenterons une défense du genre, appuyée sur les raisons

psychologiques. Le grotesque sera montre du point de vue de son rôle cathartique: nous verrons qu'il aide les enfants a supporter les sentiments d'oppression qu'ils ressentent dans un monde régi par l'autorité des adultes.

Acknowledgments

The idea for this project can be traced back to my childhood and early encounters with such delightful characters as the Twits, Willy Wonka, and the B.F.G. I remain forever indebted to my mother, a librarian and gifted storyteller, who always made certain that our bookshelves at home were well stocked with Dahl's marvelous stories. I wish to acknowledge gratefully the support and encouragement of my thesis advisor at McGill University, Professor Abbott Conway. His recommendations and guidance have been invaluable, and his sense of humor, indispensable! I have benefitted as well from the many suggestions of Professor David Mitchell in Albany, New York. I thank him for guiding me through the Children's Archives at S.U.N.Y. in order to locate vital material. Deepest gratitude is likewise extended to Nadia Siepman, my aunt and gracious host during my visits to Albany. There are many others who have contributed in some way to the completion of this thesis: my family (the Szuber cheering squad), my patient friends (who have learned more about Roald Dahl than they ever cared to), and Olivier (for trying to divert me with a lovely proposal). Your constant reassurance has been a source of strength during the course of my work. Thank you.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Alternately described by critics as ingenious, cynical, witty and sadistic, Roald Dahl is arguably one of the more difficult writers to categorise in the field of modern children's literature. Since the beginning of his career as a children's writer in 1961, he has been both praised by reviewers for his storytelling ability and fiercely attacked for his exaggerated depictions of violence and sadism. Despite varied responses to his books, however, there remains at least one point on which everyone can agree. Both supporters and detractors alike have settled on a common expression to summarise Dahl's stories: d*isgusting*. But this is by no means a criticism. Upon close examination of Dahl's work, one discovers that the vulgarity, violence and cruelty are actually components of a complex literary genre known as the comic grotesque.

In terms of its designation of a literary category, 'grotesque' is a relatively recent term, yet as an artistic style, it dates as far back as ancient Rome. Although the word was originally applied to an ornamental style of art, early responses to the form are similar to modern day responses to the literary grotesque; in other words, most critics remain divided on the subject. Views on the grotesque oscillate between two poles: the classical Vitruvian position which dismissed the grotesque as an aberration of nature, and the capricious Vasarian

position which embraced the liberating form. These two perspectives can be easily recognised in contemporary criticism of Dahl's work. On one side, we have individuals like Eleanor Cameron, who, in denouncing Dahl's work as "tasteless" and "violent", assume the rigid Vitruvian position; on the other, we find supporters like Mark West who recognise the comic element in Dahl's grotesque, and in doing so, uphold the Vasarian position. The fact that Dahl can be interpreted from both perspectives says something important about the depth of his work. It proves that his children's stories are more than modern day fairytales; it suggests, perhaps, that they should be re-examined as a noble form of comic grotesque.

As Philip Thomson explains, the grotesque is essentially the "co-presence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable" (3). In Dahl's work, this relationship manifests itself through the mingling of comic and gruesome elements. The reader's confused or divided reaction to the grotesque is important here. It points to the unresolved conflict inherent in the grotesque itself. This notion of a divided response is an important feature in Dahl's work; clearly, readers are simultaneously delighted and repelled by his stories. While recognising the comic presence in his stories, the reader also finds much of the sinister. Frequently, however, the darker aspect of the human condition is underscored through humour, which is how Dahl's texts came to be called "comic grotesque".

Because Dahl has a profound understanding of what appeals to

young readers (he describes his own mind as "child-like"), he acknowledges and appreciates their taste for grotesque fiction. Ultimately, he is aware that "children are different from adults. Children are much more vulgar than grown-ups. They have a coarser sense of humour. They are basically more cruel" (West, T*rust Your Children* 74). Dahl's stories cater to this sadistic instinct, allowing the child to vicariously live out fantasies of wish-fulfilment through his characters.

Critical response to Dahl's stories has indeed been varied; he has openly received commendation and rebuke. The reason for these differing opinions lies in the subjectivity of the reader and his or her response to the conflicting elements in Dahl's fiction. Eleanor Cameron, for example, does not see any positive qualities in his stories for children. In Horn Book Magazine, for she discusses her objections to Ch*arlie and the Chocolate Factory at* great length:

> *Wha*t I object to in Ch*arlie is* its phony representation of poverty and its phony humour, which isis based on punishment with overtones of sadism; its hypocrisy which is epitomized in its moral - stuck like a marshmallow in a lump of fudge - that TV is horrible and hateful and time-wasting and that children should read good books instead, when in fact the book itself is like nothing so much as one of the more specious television shows. (440)

Unfortunately, Cameron bases her opinion of Dahl's text on prevailing standards of 'appropriateness'. She fails to recognise the book's

inclusion within the culture of childhood, and she never fully explores its relation to the comic grotesque. Other critics, such as David Rees, have made similar mistakes. In order for Dahl's stories to remain meaningful, they must be interpreted in light of the grotesque.

Another important feature which distinguishes Dahl's grotesque from other genres is its cathartic potential. Bakhtin was one of the first critics to explore the liberating effect of the comic grotesque. This is an underlying theme in virtually all of Dahl's antiauthoritarian texts. In his discussion of Rabelais, Bakhtin draws attention to the "positive, regenerating, creative" powers of laughter (Bakhtin 71).
His view ties in nicely with psychoanalytic interpretations of children's humour which emphasise the child's role as triumphant hero. Dahl realised that there was a tremendous amount of adult hypocrisy in our world. In an attempt defeat it, he reverses the roles of adult and child. This happens in such texts as *Matilda* and *George's Marvelous Medicine*. The child becomes empowered while the adult is deflated through mocking grotesque laughter.

At the basis of Dahl's comic grotesque is the author's intention:
My only purpose in writing books for children is to encourage them to develop a love of books. I'm not trying to indoctrinate them in any way. I'm trying to entertain them. If I can get a young person into the habit of reading and thinking that books are fun, then, with a bit of luck, that habit will continue through life. (West, *Trust Your Children* 73-74)
Ultimately, Dahl views the comic grotesque as a necessary tool

designed to stimulate children to read. Should he offend adults in the process, it is a price worth paying.

Chapter I: Once Upon a Time ...
History and Etymology of the Grotesque

The grotesque first emerged as an artistic mode in Rome around 100 B.C., long before the style itself was officially christened. Early designs were largely the work of Fabullus, an obscure Roman artist who was commissioned by Emperor Nero with the interior decoration of the first century Domus Aurea, or Golden Palace. Although Fabullus devoted himself utterly to the project, he never fully captured the grandeur of Nero's intended forms. His murals were neither extraordinary, nor entirely revolutionary in style, yet through his faithful pedestrianism, he produced one of the finest examples we have of early grotesquerie.

By modern standards, Fabullus' wall paintings in the Domus Aurea would be considered highly fantastic. Characterised by the intermingling of animal, plant and human forms, the style was designed to "please the fancy and the eye rather than to instruct the soul" (Barasch 18). The frescoes were both bizarre and whimsical, consisting of "graceful fantasies, symmetrical anatomical impossibilities, small beasts, human heads, and delicate, indeterminate vegetables, all presented as ornament with a faintly mythological character imparted by representations of fauns, nymphs, satyrs, and centaurs". [1] The absurd presence in Fabullus' grotesques did not develop as a result of artistic influence alone. Much of the design evolved from ancient public

practices: mimes, the Saturnalia, and other festivals celebrating nonsense and irrationality. Because of its capacity to generate communal laughter and merriment, the grotesque was widely embraced by the majority of the general population.

Not everyone was a supporter of Fabullus' designs, however. Many classical-minded artists and writers condemned the grotesque for its lack of order and congruity. One of the most vicious attacks was launched by Vitruvius, a prominent Augustan architect of the first century B.C. He had commented disdainfully that the frescoes, once simple and functional, now corresponded to base satirical drama, serving a decorative purpose only. Ardent in his beliefs, Vitruvius went on to devote an entire section in his chronicle *De Architectura* to the denunciation of the grotesque form:

> On the stucco are monsters rather than definite representations taken from definite things. Instead of columns there rise up stalks; instead of gables, striped panels with curles leaves and volutes. Candelabra uphold pictured shrines and above the summits of these, clusters of thin stalks rise from their roots in tendrils with little figures seated upon them at random. Again, slender stalks with heads of men and animals attached to half the body.
>
> Such things neither are, nor can be, nor have been. On these lines the new fashions compel bad judges to

> condemn good craftsmanship for dullness. For how can a reed actually sustain a roof, or a candelabra the ornaments of a bagle, or a soft and slender stalk a seated statue, or how can flowers and half-statues rise alternatively from roots and stalks? Yet when people view these falsehoods, they approve rather than condemn. [2]

The abundance of grotesquerie during the Augustan period was perceived by Vitruvius as the supreme manifestation of the decline of Roman art. Clearly, he did not share Fabullus' romantic view; instead, he maintained that the artist's job was to create "imitations based upon reality", not fictitious "monsters" (VII.v.3).

The Vitruvian position was further advanced by other notable figures of the period, such as Horace. In one of his famous images from the *Ars Poetica*, Horace compares the features of bad poetry to equally absurd non-rational art:

> If a painter wishes to join a horse's neck to a human head
> And to place varied plumage on limbs brought together helter-skelter
> So that a woman beautiful in her upper parts
> Should terminate hideously in a black fish,
> Who could avoid laughter. (1-8)

What Vitruvius and Horace objected to was the exaggerated distortion of proper forms in nature and the perversion of classical standards in art. Furthermore, they argued that the fusion of heterogeneous

elements was ultimately deceitful because their likeness could not be found anywhere in the real world. These negative connotations persisted until the fall of Rome, when the grotesque finally disappeared altogether. True identification of the term would have to wait nearly a millennium and a half, until the Renaissance revival of Fabullus' early designs.

During the fifteenth century, a renewed interest in ancient art and architecture spread across Europe. Curious antiquarians and the master painters who had gathered in Rome for the construction of the Vatican began to search through the ruins that were once part of the city's glorious past. Around 1480, they made a tremendous archaeological discovery. Across from the Coliseum, buried underground, the site of Nero's Domus Aurea was uncovered. Initially, only the upper walls of the structure were visible. With the assistance of nimble guides, those seeking further access crept down into the caverns, crawling through tunnels to the rooms known as the *volta dorata* and the *cryptoportico*. They were lowered on a sling one at a time to view the delicate paintings of the grotto. Designation of the style was unanimous among the artists - *grottesco* or *grottesca* - deriving from the Italian *grotte*, meaning "caves." The naming, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham points out, 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" (27).

The artists who were present during the Domus Aurea excavations

instantly recognised in Fabullus' creations a style that was well suited to ornamentation. During the Renaissance, marginal decoration began to assume a more dominant role, at times even rivalling the central work of art. Evidence of this can be found in one of the period's greatest achievements: the adornment of the Vatican Loggias. The project was undertaken by Raphael, Chief Architect for the Vatican, and one of his gifted students, Giovanni da Udine. Both painters considered the underground frescoes of the Domus Aurea to be an example of the perfect art form, and were subsequently inspired to decorate the Loggias in a similar fashion. The original concept was relatively standard; they chose to depict historical and religious events through a series of illustrations. What made Raphael's designs so distinctive was the juxtaposition of venerable Christian narrative with bizarre pagan representations. Not only did he incorporate Fabullus' ancient grotesques in his work; he transformed the style entirely according to his own personal aesthetic. The decoration of the Loggias signifies an important turning point in the historical development of the grotesque. "Never before had *grottesche* been applied to such a large - or important - surface area; never before had ornament stood so independently" (Harpham 29).

The grotesque was not merely popular during the Renaissance; it was omnipresent. The movement which had started in Italy quickly spread through France to all of Northern Europe. Before long, imitations of Fabullus' designs began to appear in such places as the Siena

Library, the Strozzi Chapel, the Vatican, Fontainebleu Palace and other historic sites. As the new style grew increasingly visible, a semantic shift in the term simultaneously took place. *Grotesque* was no longer used exclusively as a designation for the original paintings in the Domus Aurea; it's meaning was extended to the many imitations that were being produced. These changes were recorded by Giorgio Vasari in *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters* (1550, 1568) and by Sebastiano Serlio in *Architettura* (Venice, 1551). Vasari, in particular, was responsible for establishing a positive perception of the Renaissance grotesque. In *Lives*, he refers to the antique reproductions by Pinturicchio, Raphael, Giovanni da Udine, Michelangelo and others as "divine" or "beautiful and imaginative fantasies". [3] At first, Vasari appeared to support the classical principles of art, yet at the same time, he felt that their rigid precepts were being followed too closely. The master painters of the fourteenth century (the Second Age of painting) had emphasised the elements of order, proportion, and harmony, which undeniably advanced the progress of art. However, in the Third and greatest Age, painters, sculptors, and architects "excavated out of the earth certain antiquities" and only then were able to achieve what Vasari deemed perfection of the arts. [4]

The attainment of the ideal form had much in common with the grotesque's potential for artistic liberation. This is particularly evident in Vasari's chapter on Michelangelo, an artist whose work he considered "divine". In *Lives*, Michelangelo is highly praised for his development of

a new sculptural and architectural style which contained

> an ornamentation in a composite order, in more varied and more original manner than any other master of any time ..., for in the novelty of the beautiful cornices, capitals, bases, doors, tabernacles, and tombs, he departed not a little from the work regulated by measure, order, and rule, which other men did according to common use after Vitruvius and the antiquities, to which he would not conform. That license has done much to give courage to those who have seen his methods to set themselves to imitate him, and new fantasies have since been seen which have more of the grotesque than of reason or rule in their ornamentation. Wherefore, the craftsmen owe him an infinite and everlasting obligation, he having broken the bonds and chains by reason of which they had always followed a beaten path in execution of their works. (IX, 43-44)

Despite Michelangelo's defiance of classical regulations in his decoration of the Medici Tombs, the bold individuality of his work is recognised and commended by Vasari. This is a recurring pattern throughout the history of the grotesque. The inherent subjectivity and innovation of the style frequently prevailed over rule and reason, accounting, in part, for its tremendous popularity among artists and their patrons. Vasari was fully aware of the implications of Michelangelo's

new forms and the liberty they afforded their creator. Ultimately, the grotesque was perceived as a noble breakthrough to freedom.

What is significant about Vasari's references to *grottesche* in *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters* is the underlying rejection of the inflexible Vitruvian position, which continued to thrive during the Renaissance. Although the Vasarian perspective dominated popular thought, fifteenth and sixteenth century humanists continued to study the classical principles of art set forth in *De Architectura*. They were led by Leon Batista Alberti, a scholar and artist, whose ideology centred around the belief that the universe was based on a system of mathematical harmony. In *Della Pittura* (1435), his book on painting, "he advised painters to study literature as well as mathematics, drawing, and optics, in order that they might give their work 'historical' accuracy. In addition, Alberti demanded verisimilitude provided it did not violate decorum. He recommended that painters copy antique statuary in which the most perfect forms of nature had already been portrayed" (Barasch 27). Alberti went on in his book to enforce the humanist's rules of invention, denouncing the High Renaissance practice of filling void space with complicated design. When grotesque ornamentation developed almost half a century later, *Della Pittura* was immediately perceived as an unwitting attack on the unregulated style.

Alberti's principles of painting lent authority to the denunciation of the grotesque form throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. For Vitruvian scholars who had studied the work of their

master and his humanist follower, the grotesque style was "clearly a deviation from classical conceptions of reality, from the perfected forms of the ancients which had their basis in nature, and from the standard of moral and philosophical simplicity set by Vitruvius" (Barasch 30). Yet, despite all of their objections, they could not curb the spread of Renaissance grotesque. After 1524, the new style became customary throughout Europe, overshadowing the classical school of thought almost completely. Vitruvian academicians would have to wait until the eighteenth century for grotesque art to fall into disrepute before classical precepts would hold sway once again.

Italy was not the only country saturated in grotesquerie during the Renaissance. The term was adopted in France around 1532 and entered German vocabulary during the early part of the sixteenth century. As the new style spread through Europe to different cultures, slight modifications in the word began to take shape until *grotesque* acquired several new meanings. In France, for example, the use of *crotesque* was extended to areas outside the artistic realm, such as physical objects (Rabelais uses it to describe parts of the body). In Germany, another form of art quite separate from the Italian ornamental style came to be called *groteske*. The school of *diablerie* was a Germanic movement which popularised the demons and goblins of mythological tradition. Like the Roman grotesque which preceded it, the diabolic school created impossible creatures by intermingling the various parts of different animals. Some of the finest paintings in the

tradition of *diablerie* were based on the legend of St. Anthony, a tale depicting the temptation of a third century Egyptian monk. According to popular legend, St. Anthony had retired to the desert for purification where he was discovered by Satan and subsequently tortured. In an attempt to distract the saint from his prayers, the devil adopted various animal disguises, in one instance, assuming the freakish form of a man/donkey. The diabolic school was one of the first artistic movements to establish a connection between the grotesque and the monstrous. In Germanic paintings, we begin to see the emergence of the grotesque's horrifying and macabre qualities; an area which had not been fully explored in Roman art. When one considers the underground origins of Fabullus' ancient designs, it is easy to understand how these connotations developed. "Man has always associated the underworld with the shadowy, the chaotic, and the unnatural, and the popular imagination regularly peopled Hades and Sheol with monstrous creatures, devils, and demons" (Clark 19). Subsequent references to the grotesque, especially during the Romantic period, often imply the frightful, the unearthly, the ghoulish, and the satanic.

Imitations in the style of Germanic *diablerie* were first published in Rabelais' *Les Songes Drolatiques de Pantagruel* (1555) and eventually found their way to England. In the sixteenth century, the English viewed *grottesca*, *crotesque*, and *groteske* as strictly foreign terms; they did not use the word grotesque in aesthetic criticism until the seventeenth century. Instead, the demons and fools of the diabolic school went by a

different name: *anticke* (also spelled *antique*). In England, the word was associated with "the skeletons who performed the dance of death" and with "the grinning skull of death itself" (Barasch 42). Evidence of this can be found in Shakespeare's *Richard II*:

> There [death] the Antique sits,
>
> Scoffing his state, and grinning at his Pompe. (III.ii.162-3)

The notion of death as a ridiculous *anticke* figure dates back to the Middle Ages and the interest in popular superstition. At the time, clergymen had taught their pagan converts that the elves and satyrs of folklore were, in fact, agents of the devil trying to tempt and beguile mankind. These demons were not entirely terrifying; there was much of the comic in them as well. Eventually, the figure of the clowning medieval devil carried over into the Renaissance where he appeared as the shrewd hunchback Marcolf.

The earliest version of the Marcolf legend is derived from Hebrew literature and the writings of Josephus. In the original myth, the central character appears as a demon who cleverly solves King Solomon's riddles, then steals his throne. In this version, Marcolf is a demonic creature possessing supernatural abilities. By the twelfth century, Germany had modified the character until he was nothing more than a deformed prankster. In the sixteenth century, Marcolf became a stock figure in Italian *commedia dell'arte* and a wandering joker named Scogin in England. Thus, the demon of ancient literature was transformed during the Renaissance into a silly, misshapen clown who

later came to be featured in Elizabethan drama. Many of the comic scenes in Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Rowley descend from this medieval grotesque tradition.

The word *anticke* was not only used by the English in reference to the figures of demonic literature. It was also applied to the ornamental style in painting and architecture which the Italian and French had called grotesque. Although the style was imitated to a lesser degree in England (the Tudors had little interest in ornamentation), there is record of it in Edward Hall's *Chronicle of Henry VIII* (1548) and in the poetical works of Spenser. In Hall's *Chronicle*, there are several passages which refer to *anticke* ornaments on clothing and furnishings. Grotesquerie in *The Faerie Queen* is far more detailed. Spenser goes to great lengths in his description of the tapestries in the House of Busyrane:

> Kings, queenes, lords, ladies, knights, and damsels gent
> Were heap'd together with the vulgar sort,
> And mingles with the raskell rablement,
> Without respect of person or of port,
> To shew Dan Cupids powre and great effort:
> And round about, a border was entrayled
> Of broken bowes and arrowes shivered short,
> And a long bloody river through them rayld,
> So lively and so like that living sense it fayld. (III.xi.46)

Grotesque art is also discovered in a second room, one which was "much fayrer then the former" and

> Wrought with wilde antickes, which their follies playd
> In the rich metall, as they living were:
> A thousand monstrous formes therein were made,
> Such as false Love doth oft upon him weare,
> For Love in thousand monstrous formes doth oft appeare.
> (III.xi.51)

There was an overwhelming sense of shame associated with the grotesque in English culture. This sentiment comes across in Spenser's last lines. Not only are the paintings in the House of Busyrane false representations of creatures that never were, they also depict the sinful love of the gods which violate standards of morality and decorum. The puritan mind focused in on this aspect of the grotesque and declared it a corruption of man's knowledge. The rest of the population simply dismissed the grotesque as a superfluous, yet harmless, art form.

By the seventeenth century, what Barasch refers to as the "art-blindness" of the English had finally been overcome and for the first time *grotesque* was accepted as a legitimate aesthetic term. The process was a slow one, however. *Anticke* still held sway for most of the period, although it was often doubled with *grotesque* in foreign language dictionaries and translations. The first work to formally establish a connection between anticke and grotesque was John Florio's Italian vocabulary *A Worlde of Wordes* (1598). Florio listed the definition of *grottesca* as "a kind of antique worke in any thing. Also fretted and carved worke", and "a kinde of rugged unpolished painters

worke, anticke worke". Another writer who associated *anticke* with *grotesque* was Sir Henry Wotton in *The Elements of Architecture* (1624). He was the first critic to introduce classical principles of architecture into England, but more importantly, he was the first Englishman to associate both *anticke* and *grotesque* with the unusual architectural designs found in the Domus Aurea. Wotton's challenge of the Vitruvian perspective is also noteworthy. For the most part, he accepted Vitruvius' classical rules of simplicity and harmony. He believed that architecture should remain unadorned and that black and white were the most dignified colours for the exterior decoration of homes. On the subject of interior decoration, however, Wotton thoroughly disagreed with the ancient master. Ultimately, he felt that limits should not be imposed on the imagination of the painter, provided that his creativity is divinely inspired. In other words, Wotton favoured grotesque ornamentation, which he interpreted as a kind of allegory. What he objected to was the misuse and overuse of antickes which appeared in overabundance throughout Europe.

The negative connotations associated with grotesque did not escape the attention of religious groups in the 1600's. The word *anticke* began to appear in pulpit literature, signifying licentiousness and deceit. What was originally a Renaissance battle between Vitruvian and Vasarian positions had essentially evolved into a seventeenth century dispute between the clergy and the court. The sense of fear and shame that was associated with the decorative grotesque was well instilled in the

public mind. *Antickes* had failed to conform to the spirit of Protestantism, a faith based on the ideals of simplicity, purity, and harmony with nature. English Protestants believed that *anticke* fantasies perpetuated falsehoods instead of expressing truths. Their moral objections were expressed by numerous clergymen: George Herbert, rector of Bemerton; Bishop Joseph Hall of Norwich; Archbishop Tillotson, Reverend William Chillingworth, and others. Herbert's criticism of the grotesque is well documented in *A Priest to the Temple, or The Country Parson* (1632), in which he insisted that in church "there be fit and proper texts of Scripture every where painted, and that all painting be grave and reverend, not with light colours or foolish anticks". [5] Bishop Hall used *antic* to convey the notion of spiritual impotence, while Archbishop Tillotson suggested that grotesque ornamentation was both deceitful and unrealistic. These clergymen, who were advocates of Protestant simplicity, were unwitting supporters of the Vitruvian school of functional architecture. The English court, on the other hand, held an altogether different view of grotesque or *anticke* art. In Edward Hall's *Chronicle of Henry VIII*, the fanciful description of the engraved, embroidered, and painted *antickes* in the king's palace is highly complimentary. Court masques were filled with elaborate *anticke* scenery, and eventually, grotesque art became an appropriate subject for study among gentlemen. Just as Vitruvius' voice had gone unheeded in his time, the clergy simply could not suppress the widespread appeal of *antickes* in the English court.

As the century advanced, the term *grotesque* began to assume independence. By the latter part of the 1600's, the practice of defining *grotesque* as *anticke* was reversed. *Anticke* took on a subordinate position in dictionaries and definitions until the word was dropped from art vocabulary altogether in favour of *grotesque*. At the same time, other figurative uses of the term had developed. Of particular importance to English thought was the extension of *grotesque* to the new art of caricature and the literary burlesque.

The engravings of Jacques Callot (1592-1635), which were first introduced during the early seventeenth century, were immediately hailed as *grotesque* by his countrymen in France. His style of caricature originated from two schools of art: the Germanic school of *diablerie* which had made its way to France via Italy, and the Italian school of *caricatura*, a Renaissance style which combined realistic and exaggerated journalism. Callot's work depicted contemporary scenes and events, from masquerades to wars, often ridiculing the public figures of his time through exaggerated characterisations. Many of his subjects which had been designated grotesque bore a strong resemblance to the farcical characters of burlesque literature, permitting the term to be used in connection with both art forms.

Callot's subjects were divided into three categories: the demonic, the realistic, and the fantastic. The first type of engraving referred to the *antickes* or monsters which possessed the human soul, as illustrated by the Temptation of St. Anthony. The second type is represented by

Callot's *Caprices*, droll illustrations of urban life in Florence. Among the caprices were peasants and cripples, grotesque masqueraders, and elaborate scenes from Italian ceremonies and festivals. This set of engravings was produced while Callot was studying in Italy, but by 1620, they had circulated all over France. Callot's talent for capturing large groups of low rustic figures in the midst of their daily activities established him as a model and master of the grotesque genre. In the third classification, represented by Callot's portraits of the *Balli* (dancers), the focus is on stock characters from the *commedia dell'arte* tradition. In these engravings, we find the dramatis personae of the Florentine stage (pantaloon, the cuckold, and others) in various forms of fantastic movement and dance. Callot's designs were greatly influenced by his experience among the Italian gypsies. His engravings, at once hideous and exuberant, gave rise to the grotesque's association with farce, burlesque, and the ridiculous. Callot's emphasis on the comic element is important to note. Although his subjects were of a serious nature, the artist's lighthearted approach reveals his cheerful acceptance of both the beautiful and the ugly in seventeenth century society. This positive view carried over into eighteenth century England, where the comic grotesque became the leading genre of the age.

The Augustan period of English art is typically described as an era of polished wit, refined manners, and decorum. Prevailing taste in the 1700's, however, contradicts this view altogether. For the most part,

public interest leaned heavily towards the grotesque and gothic genres. This is especially visible in the low forms of eighteenth century entertainment: masquerades, cock-fights, bull-baitings, and grotesque grinning matches. Writers of the period responding to the popularity of grotesque art composed poems and plays filled with obscene subjects and low class characters. While the demand for new varieties of grotesque was on the upswing, neo-classical criticism of the style also began to increase. The dichotomy in English thought during this period can best be explained by John Dennis, author of "A Large Account of the Taste in Poetry" (1702). In his essay, Dennis acknowledges the growing concern for the refinement of taste, yet, he rationalises the popular inclination towards comic depictions of contemporary life. Dennis believed it was necessary to have both vulgar and genteel forms of entertainment to suit the needs of the various classes in English society. With this reasoning, he attempted to defend the comic grotesque of the eighteenth century.

The habit of comparing art to poetry was a common approach to literary criticism during the neo-classical period; a development which had a profound effect on the grotesque form. The first group to use *grotesque* as a literary category were the French classicists, led by Andre Dacier. In his translation and commentary of *La Poetique d'Aristote* (Paris, 1692), Dacier attacked modern taste for Italian operas, which he referred to as "Tragedies en musiques": "Car les Opera, sont, si je l'oze dire, *les grotesques* de la Poesie, et Grotesques d'autant plus

insupportables, qu'on pretendes faire passer pour des ouvrages reguliers" (82). In his opinion, operatic tragedy was the lowest, most grotesque kind of poetry because it did not conform to Aristotelian rules. Other writers such as Addison and Fielding shared Dacier's point of view; they too connected opera with the grotesque. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, another important critical discussion on the subject emerged: Boileau's *L'art poetique*. Boileau's treatise was instrumental in establishing 'low burlesque', 'artless poetry', and 'false wit' as meanings of the word *grotesque*. In addition, he established a precedent for the use of *gothic*, in conjunction with *grotesque*, in reference to the digressive and disordered poetry of the early Renaissance. It is interesting to note that each of these literary definitions demonstrates the pejorative use of the word grotesque. This is not surprising, given the fact that Vitruvian ideals were still highly regarded by classicists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Only in the case of comic literature did writers and critics approve of the grotesque; more often than not, they, themselves, were the ones who wrote burlesque and farce.

John Dryden was the first Restoration critic to draw a parallel between the ornamental paintings known as 'grotesques' and the festive street plays modelled after Italian *commedia*. In his comparison of the two art forms, he concedes that the notion of perfection in painting can only apply to epic poetry. In tragedy and comedy, Aristotelian rules must be observed; in other words, tragedy and

comedy must follow nature more closely. The characters, therefore, must have flaws or physical deformities in order to evoke pity or laughter from the audience. On the subject of comedy, Dryden goes on to divide the genre into two classifications: the naturalistic and the fantastic. Naturalistic comedy, he explains, is based on Aristotelian rules. Its laughter is occasioned "by the sight of some deformity" and its purpose is to instruct the vulgar. Put simply, this form of comedy is the "representation of human life in inferior persons". Fantastic comedy, on the other hand, is farce. This type is not mentioned in Aristotle, for it is "out of nature". [6] Dryden's criticism of this second form is based on the views of Boileau and Horace. In *Essays*, his objections to fantastic comedy come across in the contrast between grotesque painting and literary farce:

> There is yet a lower sort of poetry and painting which is out of nature; for a farce is that in poetry, which grotesque is in picture. The persons and action of a farce are all unnatural, and the manners false, that is, inconsisting with the characters of mankind. Grotesque painting is the just resemblance of this; and Horace begins his *Art of Poetry* by describing such a figure, with a man's head, a horse's neck, the wings of a bird, and a fish's tail; parts of different species jumbled together, according to the mad imagination of the dauber; and the end of all this, as he tells you afterward, to cause laughter: a very monster in a

> Bartholomew Fair, for the mob to gape at for their two-pence. Laughter is indeed the propriety of man, but just enough to distinguish him from his elder brother with four legs. 'Tis a kind of bastard-pleasure too, taken in at the eyes of the vulgar gazers, and at the ears of the beastly audience. Church-painters use it to divert the honest countryman at public prayers, and keep his eyes open at a heavy sermon; and farce-scribblers make use of the same noble invention, to entertain citizens, country-gentlemen, and Covent Garden fops. The better sort go thither too, but in despair of sense and just images of Nature, which are adequate pleasures of the mind. (*Essays*, II, 132-3)

Dryden's position, as expressed in this paragraph from *Essays,* is a complete summation of the seventeenth century view regarding grotesque. It also demonstrates a link between sixteenth and eighteenth century impressions of the genre. Like other classicists before him, Dryden based his discussion of grotesques on the authority of Horace in the *Ars Poetica*. He also associated grotesques with church painting and decoration of the medieval and Renaissance periods. Although he did not find the style objectionable, he believed it was merely designed to amuse ignorant country folk, thereby reducing the importance of the form. In keeping with neo-classical thinking, Dryden counted grotesques among the ignoble subjects of poetry and

painting because they failed to represent nature or instruct the mind. Despite these many criticisms, his view of the grotesque was essentially a tolerant one. In the final portion of his discussion on grotesque and farce, Dryden suggests that if a farce-writer cannot please the mind, at least he can make the audience laugh.

During the eighteenth century, another form of grotesque developed in connection with the comic writing of the period. Immoral characters and ridiculous figures became popular subjects in many literary works. Generally, they represented abstract models of vice designed to be scorned by the public. Rather than conveying a moral point, however, these types inspired a different reaction altogether: laughter. This caused concern among eighteenth century authors who feared that the pleasure derived from these characterisations would not be accompanied by appropriate feelings of contempt. Many character writers who wanted to emphasise their righteous intentions used the word *grotesque* in reference to vice charactery. Steele and Addison frequently used this approach as a means of arousing the reader's disdain and correcting public error. One of the few who defended character writing was Dryden. He agreed that naturalistic comedy was the most appropriate vehicle for addressing issues of morality, but fantastic farces, like grotesque paintings, provided the masses with a relaxing form of entertainment. For the most part, Dryden's sentiments were shared by the English public. Evidence of this resides in the overwhelming popularity of grotesque vice characters; some of the

most beloved comic figures of the eighteenth century.

Before the mid 1700's, the genre that Aristotle had broadly referred to as Comedy began to assume various forms: comedy, high burlesque, and low burlesque or farce. The first kind was of a moral nature. Characters were made to appear ridiculous so that their faults could be exposed and corrected. The second type, just as moral as the first, referred to parody and mock-poetry in which base subjects and characters were elevated by heroic verse. The last class involved figures that were so highly exaggerated that they challenged audience identification and moral instruction completely. The term *grotesque* was generally used to describe this last type. Of the many authors trying to make sense of these definitions was Fielding. In the preface to *Joseph Andrews*, he tried to clear up some of the confusion, and, at the same time, give moral depth to the subject. Like Dryden, Fielding acknowledged the difference between Aristotelian comedy, which imparted a moral message, and burlesque, which simply entertained. His own novel, which he described as a "comic romance" or a "comic epic poem in prose", was neither a serious romance nor strictly burlesque. Of the distinction between the comic and the burlesque, Fielding wrote:

> . . . no two species of writing can differ more widely. For as the latter is ever the exhibition of what is monstrous and unnatural, and where our delight, if we examine it, arises from the surprising absurdity, as in appropriating

> the manners of the highest to the lowest, or *e converso*; so in the former we should ever confine ourselves strictly to nature, from the just imitation of which will flow all the pleasure we can this way convey to a sensible reader. (xx)

The art of comedy, according to Fielding, was much more dignified than burlesque; its aim was not to produce hollow laughter, but to reveal the ridiculous in nature. Fielding did not completely object to the burlesque; in fact, he was a great believer in the therapeutic value of laughter and its ability to lighten misery and distress. Yet, he explains that the laughter which he tries to evoke in *Joseph Andrews* does not come from ugliness and distortion itself, but from the ugly and distorted posing as the beautiful and refined.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, what Germans referred to as 'grotesque-comedy' could no longer be dismissed as a trivial amusement. Critics' attempts to abolish caricature and low comedy only served to produce newer forms of grotesquerie, since popular demand for the gothic and grotesque continued to grow. What these events point to is the fundamental eighteenth century acceptance of the grotesque form. It was during this period that the need for comic relief in the shape of low comic forms finally came to be recognised.

The beneficial aspect of the grotesque was first touched upon in 1761 by Justus Moeser, German author of harlequin comedy. Like Fielding, he rejected classical opinion which accepted only two forms of

comedy, the classical and the romance. He felt it was possible to have many different kinds of comedy: heroic, burlesque, farce, and grotesque. In *Harlekin oder Vertheidigung des Groteske-komischen*, translated as *Harlequin: Or a Defense of Grotesque Comic Performances*, Moeser explores the positive mental and physical effects associated with the grotesque:

> People go to the theatre solely to be entertained, and the grotesque is an ancient and tested source of pleasure. The depressed and the bored, men weighted down by serious affairs, find relaxation at Harlequinades. The numb, the sluggish, and the insensate are aroused and cheered at grotesque plays and return to their occupations, having experienced some comic relief. (81-6)

The exaggerated performance in grotesque theatre was viewed by Moeser as essential to the comic form's moral and didactic aims. By raising common fools to exalted heights and reducing royal figures to miniatures on the stage, not only does the writer attempt to evoke laughter; he also hopes to instruct his audience. With this in mind, Moeser insisted that grotesque performances were no less deserving of public attention than the grotesque paintings found in any museum.

By the arrival of the nineteenth century, the word grotesque had taken on a wide variety of connotations. It was the designation for various subjects in art and literature: the Italian *commedia*, the

Germanic school of *diablerie*, Renaissance farce, and eighteenth century character writing. What started out as an ornamental style during the Renaissance had evolved into a broad classification for art, literature, themes, and characters. The diversity of the grotesque somewhat accounts for its problematic nature; essentially, it is one style capable of assuming a variety of forms. Because of the confusion inherent in the genre, nineteenth century writers such as Coleridge sought to limit its definition. In his lecture "On the Distinction of the Witty, the Droll, the Odd, and the Humorous; The Nature and Constituents of Humour; Rabelais, Swift, Sterne" (1818), he offers this description of grotesque: "When words or images are placed in unusual juxtaposition rather than in connection, and are so placed merely because the juxtaposition is unusual - we have the odd or the grotesque" (260). Coleridge further subdivided the grotesque into two types of comedy: the transcendental and the descendental. The former was sublime, moral, and true; the latter trivial, sensual, and false. The classification was determined by the artist's motive, either to aspire to a metaphysical level of humour, or to simply achieve the finite. In Coleridge's opinion, the highest form of comedy was attained by Rabelais, whose playfulness acted as a shield against the monks and bigots of his time. Rabelais' humour and his outrageous characters were not perceived by Coleridge as grotesque; they were moral "phantasmagoric allegories" (Barasch 154). Only later were they declared a form of noble grotesque-satire.

Another meaning for grotesque which related to 'gothic' developed among the Romantics in the 1800's. During this period, literary works were filled with morbid themes and macabre subjects often portrayed in light verse. The mixing of matter and style, although ridiculous by classical standards, produced a hybrid genre: the romantic grotesque. Victor Hugo was a strong supporter of this new mode of expression. In *Preface to Cromwell* (1827), he defended the juxtaposition of such opposites as the beautiful and the ugly, the ridiculous and the horrific, and the comic and the tragic, all of which produced a discomfiting effect. Hugo's aesthetic view was essentially an inclusive one; he believed that true art must reflect the whole of life, including the good and the evil. By laying these antitheses side by side, he believed the grotesque could be perceived as a noble form; "a necessary complement without which the sublime and the beautiful must remain imperfect" (Clayborough 45).

In the early twentieth century, we begin to see a formal definition of grotesque in literary criticism take shape. The topic was initially addressed in a 1906 dissertation by Lily B. Campbell, who suggested that the tendency in literary criticism would lean towards ugly and grotesque subjects. She was, of course, correct. Following the bloody history of the early decades, there grew an increasing interest in grotesque related genres such as tragicomedy and the absurd, both of which explored the anguish of the human condition. Twentieth century writers, for example, frequently placed perverse characters in absurd

situations, then added a comic element to demonstrate their pathetic quest for redemption. Such work possesses an important transcendental quality; as Barasch suggests, it "can approach the sublime" (162). The modern grotesque has since become a powerful instrument in our attempt to comprehend a world turned upside down; fortunately, it has the power to debunk the grimness and solemnity of our age through laughter.

In terms of reaching a clear definition of the grotesque, the twentieth century has not experienced any more success than other periods. There is still no real agreement in terms of usage; even today, the word denotes an aesthetic category, a genre, a style, a form, and an image. Present tendency is simply to view the grotesque as an ambivalent "thing". In its highest form, however, it can instruct and enlighten us as we search for the meaning of existence.

Notes

[1] Harpham 26. For further descriptions of grotesque design found in the Domus Aurea and in the Baths of Trajan and of Titus, see Barasch 18-19 and Clark 18.

[2] Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, ed. and trans. Frank Granger (Cambridge, Mass: The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard UP, 1934), vol. II, 105.

[3] Vasari, *Lives*, IX, 213; VIII, 257.

[4] Vasari, *Lives*, IV, 81.

[5] George Herbert, *A Priest to the Temple, or The Country Parson*, 2nd ed. (London, 1671), 48.

[6] John Dryden, *Essays*, ed. W.P. Ker (New York), II, 132.

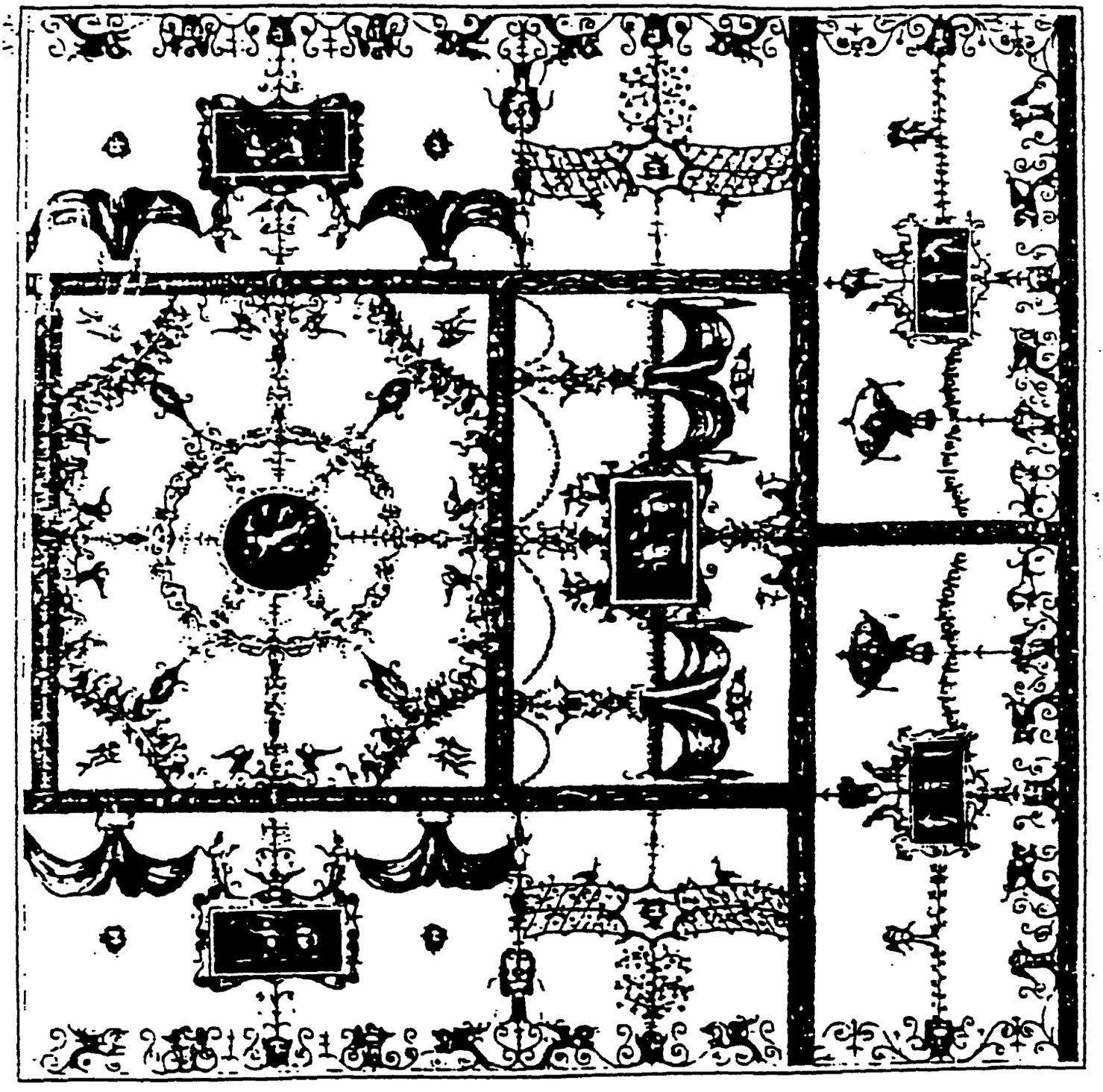

fig. 1

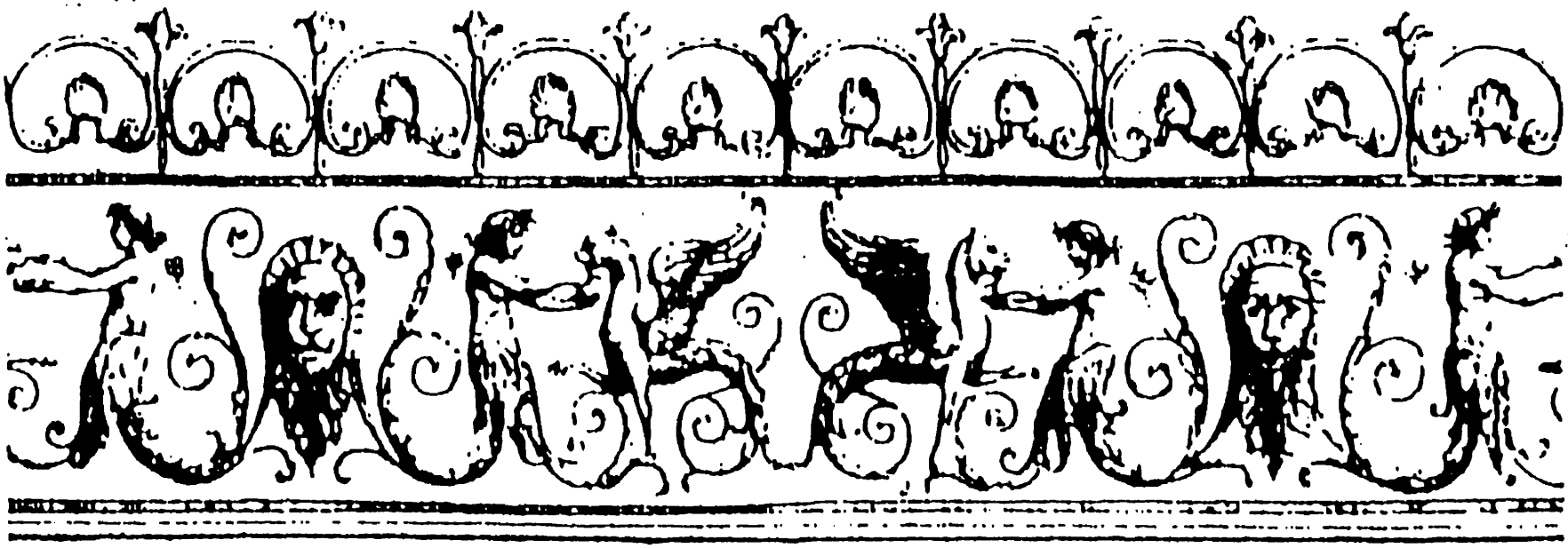

fig. 2

fig. 3

fig. 4

fig. 5

Fig. 1. Nicolas Ponce, engraving from Domus Aurea designs, in *Descriptions des bains de Titus*, 1786.

Fig. 2. Nicolas Ponce, engraving from Domus Aurea designs, in *Descriptions des bains de Titus*, 1786, detail.

Fig. 3. Giovanni Volpato, engraving of pilaster in Vatican Loggia, in *Le Loggie de Rafaele nel Vaticano*, 1777, detail.

Fig. 4. Marcello Ferraro, engraving of pilaster in Vatican Loggia, in *Les ornaments de Raphael*, 1860, detail.

Fig. 5. Martin Schongauer, "The Temptations of St. Anthony," c. 1470.

Chapter 2: Into the Forest ...
Theory and Criticism of the Grotesque

One of the central problems surrounding a study of the grotesque is the elusiveness of the genre. Historically and semantically, it has almost completely escaped formal classification. In this sense, Vitruvius had an edge over modern theorists; at least he was able to offer a detailed description of the style which he objected to. In nineteenth and twentieth century criticism, the grotesque cannot be packaged as tightly and thus loses its precision. It is perhaps inevitable, then, that great confusion should prevail among scholarly works which were designed to clarify the subject.

The field of the grotesque is unique in that nearly any given theory can be supported through a careful choice of examples. To illustrate this point, one need only examine two of the most important critical discussions on the topic: Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* and Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*. Each work manages to contradict the other entirely on the most basic of assumptions, largely due to the different approaches adopted by the theorists. In his critical study, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, Arthur Clayborough attempts to summarise these various methods, which he divides into four categories:

(i) The grotesque is defined in terms of the attitude of the

> artist, his deliberate intentions and his involuntary reactions to circumstances (in terms of the conditions of its creation).
>
> (ii) The effect or impression created upon the reader or spectator is used as a basis for definition.
>
> (iii) The grotesque is defined by stating its relationship with other categories, the sublime, the ugly, the fantastic, the comic, caricature, etc.
>
> (iv) The characteristic features of a limited but 'representative' group of works are used as the criteria for a definition of the grotesque. (22)

Clayborough's first method is illustrated by Kant's reference to the grotesque in the *Critic of Judgment* (1790):

> But where for mere purposes of entertainment the free play of the imagination (*Vorstellungskrafte*) is desired, in pleasure gardens, the decoration of rooms, in every kind of embellishment of household effects and things of that sort, regularity, which makes its presence felt as a restraint, will be avoided as much as possible. Thus, indeed, the English taste in gardens, the baroque taste in furniture, rather urges the power of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) to something approaching the grotesque, and supposes that it is in this very separation from all constraint of rules that taste can reveal its

> greatest perfection in the projection of the imagination (*Einbildungskraft*). (3-4)

The second method deals with the effect of the grotesque upon its audience. An excellent example of this type can be found in Edgar Allan Poe's characterisation of the masqueraders in *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842):

> Be sure they were grotesque. There was much glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm - much of what has since been seen in *Hernani*. There were arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. There was much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the *bizarre*, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust. [1]

According to Kayser, Poe's description is "perhaps the completest and most appropriate definition which the word grotesque has ever been given by an artist" (83-84).

The third method refers to a technique which was discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. In an attempt to define the grotesque, many writers developed parallels between the complex genre and other aesthetic categories, such as caricature and farce. Rather than restricting the delineation of the word, however, their comparisons only served to illustrate the general disagreement regarding the exact nature of the grotesque's relationship to other forms.

Clayborough's fourth and final method is the most common approach to the critical study of the grotesque. Most theorists realised early on that it would be impossible to find a common thread in each and every form of literary grotesque. To emphasise their particular view, they relied on a small sampling of texts with a similar focus. Of the many scholars who adopted this technique, the two whose work had the greatest impact on grotesque theory were John Ruskin and Wolfgang Kayser.

In his elaborate analysis of the Renaissance grotesque in *Stones of Venice*, Ruskin concluded that all grotesque art necessarily contains an element of play or sportiveness. Grotesque, therefore, should be interpreted as a comic genre based on the juxtaposition of the fearful and the ludicrous:

> First, then, it seems to me that the grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful; that, as one or other of these elements prevails, the grotesque falls into two branches, sportive grotesque, and terrible grotesque; but that we cannot legitimately consider it under these two aspects, because there are hardly any examples which do not in some degree combine both elements; there are few grotesque so utterly playful as to be overcast with no shade of fearfulness, and few so fearful as absolutely to exclude all ideas of jest. (115)

Following his division of the two external elements of the grotesque, Ruskin then proceeded to concentrate on the internal elements as represented by the artist's state of mind at the point of creation. Based on the indulgence or repression of the playful aspect, he further separated humanity into four distinct classes: "the men who play wisely; who play necessarily; who play inordinately; and who play not at all" (116).

The first class of mankind, according to Ruskin, was of a highly spiritual nature and played only in the most restrained manner. This "wise" playfulness could be found in Wordsworth and Plato, poets who captured both the sublime and the terrible in their grotesques. At the other extreme is Ruskin's fourth class, those "who play not at all". These men are "so dull or so morose as to be incapable of inventing or enjoying jest", or "utterly oppressed with labour, and driven too hard by the necessities of the world to be capable of any species of happy relaxation" (118). Such men only find expression in the bitterness of mockery, thereby classifying their work among the terrible rather than the playful grotesque.

Between these extremes lie two further groups: "those who play necessarily" and "those who play inordinately". The former refers to those men who "must pass a large part of their lives in employments both irksome and toilsome, demanding an expenditure of energy which exhausts the system" (117). When they do have leisure time to satisfy their nobler instincts, they are too exhausted for the disciplined work

which is required for noble ideas. "They therefore exert themselves without any determined purpose ... and put themselves to such fantastic exercise, as may soonest indemnify them for their past imprisonment, and prepare them to endure its recurrence" (117). It is under these conditions that the element of play produces the noble or true grotesque. The final category refers to men who "neither play wisely nor necessarily, but are enabled by circumstances, and permitted by their want of principle, to make amusement the object of their existence" (117-8). This type of figure has the energy to indulge in play, but only of a weak, sensual sort. Inevitably, he creates what Ruskin calls the ignoble or false grotesque.

The difference between noble and ignoble grotesque has mainly to do with the sensibility of the artist and the manner in which he perceives his subject:

> The master of the noble grotesque knows the depth of all at which he seems to mock, and would feel it at another time, or feels it in a certain undercurrent of thought even while he jests with it; but the workman of the ignoble grotesque can feel and understand nothing, and mocks at all things with the laughter of the idiot and the cretin. (128)

In brief, true grotesque is what Ruskin refers to as the "*repose* or play of a *serious* mind", whereas false grotesque is "the result of the *full exertion* of a *frivolous* one" (130). The ignoble grotesque, he goes on to explain, is monstrous because it is rooted in vice and sensuality rather

than spirituality. It is never really horrible, only disgusting. This view inevitably prompted his renowned attack on the Raphaelite grotesque.

Like Vitruvius, Ruskin believed that the grotesque murals of ancient Rome and the Renaissance period were deplorable in style, yet he disagreed with the grounds on which the Augustan architect based his criticism. While Vitruvius denounced the grotesque as 'unreal' and 'unnatural', Ruskin took the argument a step further, declaring the pagan designs to be fundamentally evil. It was his opinion that Raphael's bizarre representations in the Vatican were a violation of the supreme order of things; weak, sensual, and frivolous forms of nonsense. What particularly upset Ruskin was the misuse of superb craftsmanship. He did not object to ornament itself, but he did have strict views regarding its proper function. Because Raphael's designs failed to inspire "Divine terror" or to teach "noble lessons", they were counted among the ignoble grotesque.

What Ruskin was responding to in *Stones of Venice* was essentially the corruption of meaning inherent in the ignoble grotesque. He was not the only critic to address the negative implications of the genre. Wolfgang Kayser in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* takes the central attribute of the grotesque to be "the power of evoking in audience or reader a sense of the radical alienness of the world, its estrangement from man, its essential absurdity" (Steig 253).

Kayser's book was the first to suggest that the grotesque can be viewed, must be viewed if it is to remain meaningful, as a

"comprehensive structural principle of works of art" (180). Like Clayborough, he devised a set of criteria for the study of the grotesque. Like other forms of art, we are told that the grotesque has three aspects: the conditions of its creation (what Clayborough referred to as the artist's state of mind), the actual work, and the impression it makes on the reader or audience. It is the latter which Kayser felt to be most important in attempting a definition of grotesque.

In his chapter on theory, Kayser discusses the impression made upon him by grotesque literary works which he had previously examined. Based on his reaction, he offers four interpretations of the genre. First, "the grotesque is the estranged world". This happens when our world is transformed suddenly and the elements in it turn out to be strange and ominous. "We are so strongly affected and terrified because it is our world which ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we would be unable to live in this changed world" (184-5). An excellent example of this first type is Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. The character Gregor suddenly awakes in terror to discover himself transformed into a gigantic insect. From this perspective, it can be argued that the grotesque "instills fear of life rather than fear of death" (Kayser 185). Second, the grotesque is viewed as the creation of an impersonal force. In other words, Kayser suggests that the grotesque is something which is 'out there' and cannot be fully identified. This characteristic serves to deepen the sense of horror inspired by the transformed world. The question remains: who or what is intruding upon us? "If we were able

to name these powers and relate them to the cosmic order, the grotesque would lose its essential quality" (185). Third, "the grotesque is a play with the absurd" (187). Here, Kayser interprets the grotesque as a negative agent which takes possession of the artist's soul. "It may begin in a gay and carefree manner - as Raphael wanted to play in his grotesques. But it may also carry the player away, deprive him of his freedom, and make him afraid of the ghosts which he so frivolously invoked" (187). Kayser, however, does not completely overlook the cathartic potential of successful grotesque art. In counterbalance to the feelings of helplessness which are inspired by the dark forces of our world, true grotesque "effects a secret liberation" (188). As he puts it, "the darkness has been sighted, the ominous powers discovered, the incomprehensible forces challenged" (188). In conjunction with this view, the grotesque is finally interpreted as "an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (188). Grotesque art, then, can be seen as an attempt to banish demons, or put simply, as a means of alleviating our fears.

In his discussion, Kayser is careful to distinguish the "estranged world" of the grotesque from the purely fantastic: "Viewed from the outside, the world of the fairy tale could also be regarded as strange and alien, yet its world is not estranged" (184). Despite their fantastic quality, the elements in fairy tale are still "familiar and natural to us" (184). According to Kayser, then, Roald Dahl's stories could not be classified as grotesque, since they are essentially modern day

fairytales. This points to one of the many weaknesses of Kayser's study. Because he restricts the definition of grotesque to the alien world, he naturally overemphasises the role of terror and underscores the comic element. Ruskin's study was more objective; he realised that the "ludicrous" and "fearful" elements of the grotesque were never entirely in isolation from one another, but were usually found in some combination.

Another problem surrounding Kayser's criticism of the grotesque is his failure to "locate the demonic within man himself". [2] In referring to the grotesque as an external or "impersonal force", Kayser neglects the fact that man's impulse towards the grotesque is instinctive and ultimately personal. Psychoanalytic theory suggests that the grotesque resides in the deepest realm of man's unconscious, the "demonic" region of his mind. Based on this premise, it is possible to interpret the grotesque as the conflict between man's sense of the eternal and his perception of a limited physical world.

In opposition to Kayser's theory of the grotesque is Bakhtin's critical study *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin's interpretation is based on the ancient tradition of folk humour, an area that had not been previously fully explored. In *Rabelais*, the "fearful" element of the grotesque which Kayser emphasised is ultimately purged through the unifying principle of laughter. What remains is the "ludicrous" element, a necessary component of the culture of folk humour.

As Bakhtin states in the introduction, few critics ever expressed a true

understanding of Rabelais; "many were repulsed and still are repulsed by him" (3). This attitude resides in the radical, "nonliterary" nature of Rabelais' images and descriptions which failed to conform to classical standards. "No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook" (3). In other words, Rabelais was never taken seriously because his images had more to do with laughter than anything else, and laughter was perceived to be the lowest form of entertainment.

In his discussion of folk culture, Bakhtin describes the three forms which had the greatest influence on Rabelais' work:

> 1. *Ritual spectacles*: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace.
>
> 2. *Comic verbal compositions*: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and vernacular.
>
> 3. *Various genres of billingsgate*: curses, oaths, popular blazons. (5)

By *ritual spectacles*, Bakhtin is referring to the parish feasts and fairs which often included the participation of "giants, dwarfs, monsters, and trained animals" (5). The importance of carnival is well documented in Bakhtin's text:

> Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea

> embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants. (7)

Bakhtin interprets carnival as a second, unofficial world of folk culture where people could easily escape from religious and political authority. Those who participated in such festivals entered a "utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance" (9). Carnival laughter was also perceived as a form of liberation and release:

> It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. the entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival. (11-12)

The same comic spirit is present in Bakhtin's second form of folk humour: the verbal compositions. Comic literature of the Middle Ages

was infused with the carnival spirit and made use of its many forms and images. For instance, parody, one of the most popular literary forms of the period, was frequently used to undermine official ideologies of the church. [3] The carnival spirit also manifested itself in medieval comic theatre and in the miracle and morality plays, although to a lesser degree. It took the shape of low comic demons who gleefully tormented the virtuous.

Bakhtin's third form of the culture of folk humour, the familiar speech in the marketplace, involves the suspension of hierarchic distinctions and the prohibitions of everyday life:

> It is characteristic for the familiar speech of the marketplace to use abusive language, insulting words or expressions, some of them quite lengthy and complex. The abuse is grammatically and semantically isolated from context and is regarded as a complete unit, something like a proverb ...
>
> Profanities and oaths were not initially related to laughter, but they were excluded from the sphere of official speech because they broke its norms; they were therefore transferred to the familiar sphere of the marketplace. Here in the carnival atmosphere they acquired the nature of laughter and became ambivalent. (17-18)

The speech patterns of the marketplace, therefore, became a melting

pot for those forms which were excluded from official language. In this manner, they became filled with the spirit of carnival and acquired a general tone of laughter.

One of the most significant images in Rabelais' work is the human form. "For Bakhtin - and one finds it difficult to disagree with him - the grotesque is essentially physical, referring always to the body and bodily excesses and celebrating these in an uninhibited, outrageous but essentially joyous fashion" (Thomson 56). The depiction of the human body in relation to food, drink, defecation, and sexual activity is classified by Bakhtin as "the material bodily principle". These exaggerations in the human form were not intended to be viewed as monstrous or gross. Rather, they represent the images of bodily life: "fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance" (19). The grotesque body, as Bakhtin suggests, possesses an infinite quality. It is always in the act of becoming:

> 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. (317)

This view of the material bodily principle, then, is essentially positive

because it implies the continual renewal of the human form.

Another significant feature in Rabelais' work is the presence of grotesque realism. Bakhtin interprets this as degradation, that is, "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (19-20). The tradition of grotesque realism dates back to the medieval period and the role of the clown during public tournaments. In an attempt to generate laughter from the crowd, he would transfer the high, ceremonial gestures reserved for kings to the lower material sphere. The grotesque realism in Rabelais is based on this upward and downward movement:

> Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. to degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. (21)

The image in grotesque realism, as we saw previously in the image of the body, reflects an unfinished metamorphosis; something in a state of

transformation. Ultimately, its character is highly ambivalent. Grotesque realism can be viewed in direct contradiction to the literary canon of antiquity. According to the classical position, the body was "a strictly completed, finished product ... fenced off from all other bodies" (Bakhtin 29). Furthermore, any notion about the unfinished character of the body was eliminated in traditional literature. Not surprisingly, many classical critics denounced grotesque realism as a hideous and formless art.

In *Rabelais*, Bakhtin goes on to explore some of the theories of the grotesque, which have developed in the twentieth century. His criticism of Wolfgang Kayser is particularly interesting since both critics hold radically different views on the same subject. Bakhtin recognises Kayser's analysis as the first serious theoretical study of the grotesque, yet, at the same time, he outlines many of the book's shortcomings. While Bakhtin acknowledges the value of Kayser's observations, he objects to the narrow, limited scope of the study. Kayser's text "offers the theory of the Romantic and modernist forms only, or, more strictly speaking, of exclusively modernist forms, since the author sees the Romantic age through the prism of his own time and therefore offers a somewhat distorted interpretation" (46). Bakhtin also points out Kayser's failure to discuss the grotesque of the pre-Romantic era, such as the medieval and Renaissance grotesque which were linked to Rabelais' culture of folk humour. This last issue is of particular concern to Bakhtin since he maintained that true grotesque could not be separated from the culture of folk humour and the carnival spirit.

Carrying on with his criticism, Bakhtin examines Kayser's characteristics of grotesque imagery:

> Kayser's definitions first of all strike us by the gloomy, terrifying tone of the grotesque world that alone the author sees. In reality gloom is completely alien to the entire development of this world up to the romantic period. We have already shown that the medieval and Renaissance grotesque, filled with the spirit of carnival, liberated the world from all that is dark and terrifying; it takes away all fears and is therefore completely gay and bright. All that was frightening in ordinary life is turned into amusing or ludicrous monstrosities. (47)

Kayser essentially views the grotesque as a hostile, alien, and inhuman force. As previously discussed, he maintains this position through a comparison with fairy tale, where the world becomes strange and unusual, but not alienated. Bakhtin, on the other hand, perceives within the grotesque the possibility for an entirely different world, another way of life. "It leads men out of the confines of the apparent (false) unity, of the indisputable and stable. Born of folk humour, it always represents in one form or another, through these or other means, the return to Saturn's golden age to earth - the living possibility of its return" (48). What Bakhtin envisions is a friendlier world, one which is governed according to the spirit of carnival truth.

The next point addressed by Bakhtin is Kayser's interpretation of the

grotesque as a fundamentally impersonal force. According to Kayser, the alien power which rules the world was to be viewed with fear and terror. Bakhtin challenges this position: "Kayser himself often speaks of the freedom of fantasy characteristic of the grotesque. But how is such freedom possible in relation to a world ruled by the alien power of the *id*? Here lies the contradiction of Kayser's concept" (49). Bakhtin interpreted the effects of the alien world in an entirely different way. His view was ultimately positive; he saw it as a liberating force from the prevailing world concept.

The last point of Kayser's theory which is discussed by Bakhtin is his treatment of grotesque laughter. In his study, Kayser describes it as follows: "Laughter originates on the comic and caricatural fringe of the grotesque. Filled with bitterness, it takes on characteristics of the mocking, cynical, and ultimately satanic laughter while turning into the grotesque" (Kayser 187). This notion of destructive humour is not shared by Bakhtin. Instead, he focuses on the "gay, liberating and regenerating element of laughter" (Bakhtin 51).

The difference between Kayser's theory and Bakhtin's theory can be viewed in terms of the underlying psychological effects of the grotesque. Philip Thomson interprets this as the "clash between incompatible reactions - laughter on the one hand and horror or disgust on the other" (Thomson 2):

> ... a grotesque scene conveys the notion of [that which is] simultaneously laughable and horrifying or disgusting.

> What will be generally agreed upon, in other words, is that 'grotesque' will cover, perhaps among other things, the co-presence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable. The reader may well do one of two things. He may decide that the passage is more funny than horrifying, he may 'laugh it off' or treat it as a joke; alternatively, he may be indignant and regard it as an outrage to his moral sensibilities that such things should be presented in a humorous light. (3)

Thomson's description of the reader's opposing reactions to the grotesque is precisely what we find in Kayser and Bakhtin. The former emphasises the horrific or fearful element of the grotesque, while the latter focuses on the comic aspect. What Thomson suggests is that the grotesque should, in fact, be viewed as a mixture of both elements in more or less the same proportion. The disharmony which results from this combination is a distinguishing feature of the grotesque. If the conflict is resolved, "the special impact of the grotesque will be lacking" (Thomson 21).

The present tendency among modern day critics is to regard the grotesque in the same manner as Thomson: as a highly ambivalent form. This is likely the only agreement they will ever reach on the subject. Because interpretation of the grotesque relies heavily on reader response criticism, it is almost certain that each individual will react subjectively, making it difficult to draw any uniform conclusions

about the genre. This accounts for the differing perspectives in the critical studies of Ruskin, Kayser, and Bakhtin, and points to the problematic nature of the grotesque itself.

Notes

[1] Edgar Allan Poe, *Selected Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*, with an introduction by John Curtis (Penguin Books, 1956), 194-5.

[2] Michael Steig, "Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 29.2 (1970): 254.

[3] Bakhtin cites "Cyprian's supper" (*coena Cypriani)* as a popular religious parody which offered a "peculiar festive and carnivalesque travesty of the entire Scriptures" (13).

Chapter 3: Encounters with Dirty Beasts

Roald Dahl and the comic grotesque

When asked during a 1988 interview why he explicitly refers to grotesque bodily functions in his children's books, Roald Dahl responded:

> Children regard bodily functions as being both mysterious and funny, and that's why they often joke about these things. Bodily functions also serve to humanise adults. There is nothing that makes a child laugh more than an adult suddenly farting in a room. If it were a queen, it would be even funnier. (West, *Trust your Children* 75)

This powerful image, loaded with scatological connotations, is typical of the grotesque humour which characterises much of Roald Dahl's writings. A self-declared subversive in the field of children's literature, Dahl has always refused to be held back by the world's reverence for such classics as *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Secret Garden*. This view manifests itself in his comic grotesque imagery. While traditional children's tales are typically populated by bunnies and bears, Dahl's stories contain hideous Hornswogglers, Whangdoodles, and other dirty beasts.

In Dahl's fiction, the grotesque appears in three distinct forms: the author's method of characterisation, his development of plot, and his

use of language. The first form of grotesque is easiest to perceive. Nearly all of Dahl's truly grotesque stories contain physically repulsive antagonists: Mr. and Mrs. Twit, George's grandmother, and Augustus Gloop, to name a few. In Dahl's exaggerated descriptions of these characters, the grotesque permeates through and through. In the second form of grotesque, Dahl introduces twisted and violent plot devices which typically produce an alteration in the physical state. Examples of grotesque plots can be found in *The Twits*, where Mr. and Mrs. Twit are glued upside down, and in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* where miserable consequences befall the naughty children. Finally, in terms of the third form of grotesque, Dahl's language is always heightened when he describes something hideous or outrageous. He does this most frequently in his books for young children, such as *The Twits,* where words such as *smelly*, *ghastly*, and *screwy* permeate the text.

In order to understand Dahl's mentality towards the grotesque and its role in his stories, we must examine his view of society. From early on, it was clear that Dahl's mindset was well suited to the grotesque genre. He was raised in England by gentle Norwegian parents who were nothing like the authority figures he encountered in the British school system. From the time he was young, Dahl sensed that he was an outsider. His family spoke mostly Norwegian at home, and vacations were regularly spent visiting relatives in Norway. As a result of these strong ties, Dahl and his family often felt isolated from

traditional English society.

In his autobiography *Boy*, Dahl recounts some of the childhood experiences that may have contributed his outsider mentality. The episode which is featured most prominently is Dahl's introduction to corporal punishment while attending Llandaff Cathedral School. As punishment for a nasty prank which Dahl and his friends played on a local merchant, each boy received a caning from the headmaster, Mr. Coombes:

> Mr. Coombes stood back and took up a firm stance with his legs well apart. I though how small Thwaites's bottom looked and how very tight it was. Mr. Coombes had his eyes focused squarely upon it. He raised the cane high above his shoulder, and as he brought it down, it made a loud swishing sound, and then there was a crack like a pistol shot as it struck Thwaites's bottom.
>
> Little Thwaites seemed to lift about a foot into the air and he yelled 'Ow-w-w-w-w-w-w!' and straightened up like an elastic. '*Ard*er!' shrieked a voice from over in the corner. (47)

This experience proved to be very upsetting for Dahl, who was raised in a warm and loving home. The relish with which the headmaster had distributed those lashes made him distrustful of authority figures. It was a view he would hold for his entire life, and it ultimately contributed to the subversive element in books such as *The Twits*, *George's*

Marvelous Medicine, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.*

Intended for very young readers, *The Twits* was written with a distinct emphasis on the visual aspect of the grotesque. The central characters are Mr. and Mrs. Twit, a repulsive and sadistic couple who enjoy playing nasty tricks on each other. Like the debased Marcolf figure of Renaissance literature, Mr. Twit is physically and morally grotesque. Because he never bothered to wash his beard, "there were always hundreds of bits of old breakfasts and lunches and suppers sticking to the hairs around his face" (6). Dahl does not simply finish his description here; he goes on to catalogue the "tiny little specks of dried-up scrambled eggs stuck to the hairs, and spinach and tomato ketchup and fishsticks and minced chicken livers and all the other disgusting things Mr. Twit liked to eat" (6). It is interesting to note the depth of Dahl's grotesque imagery. Mr. Twit's beard is not full of tiny little bits of cake or dried up popcorn; instead, Dahl carefully selects those foods that are revolting to children, such as spinach, fish, and liver. The description of Mr. Twit's dirty beard is further amplified in the drawings of Quentin Blake. In scientific fashion, Dahl's illustrator focuses in on the beard and neatly labels each scrap of mouldy food. One critic who found this description to be objectionable was David Rees. He argues that in *The Twits* "facial hair is perceived almost as a moral defect: bearded people are dirty and are trying to hide their real appearance." Rees adds that "these remarks do not apply just to Mr. Twit (if they did, one would accept them), but to bearded men in general." [1] Rees'

negative response to the description of Mr. Twit's beard is a testimony to the strength of Dahl's grotesque image. Clearly, Dahl has achieved the effect he intended to.

The character of Mrs. Twit is no less hideous than her husband. Dahl explains that she was once very beautiful, but "when that person has ugly thoughts every day, every week, every year, the face gets uglier and uglier until it gets so ugly you can hardly bear to look at it " (9). Blake's illustrations of Mrs. Twit's metamorphosis from beautiful to ugly complement Dahl's description. They also serve to emphasise the contrast between the sublime and the grotesque.

Following his description of the Twits, Dahl goes on to chronicle their many grotesque pranks. First, Mrs. Twit places her glass eye in her husband's mug of beer. In exchange, he slips a frog into her bed. When she cooks him "Squiggly Spaghetti" made of worms, he retaliates by shortening her cane, thereby leading her to believe she has contracted the "dreaded shrinks" (20). These jokes are an essential part of Dahl's wish-fulfilment fantasy. Clearly, children are delighted by these pranks because they can imagine playing them on each other. The type of laughter which is occasioned by such scenes is also significant; it essentially bridges the theories of Kayser and Bakhtin. When children laugh at Dahl's plot devices, we find a mixture of Kayser's "satanic laughter" and Bakhtin's joyous "carnival laughter". From a psychoanalytic point of view, both types can easily coexist; the former is often hidden in the subconscious, while the latter is external and

permissible by society's standards. The laughter produced by Dahl's stories contains both elements. While the young reader laughs freely at the comic portrayals, there is another of part of him that takes pleasure in the Twits' retribution.

Muggle-Wump and his family are important characters in *The Twits*. Besides assuming the role of protagonist, Muggle-Wump heightens the grotesque immorality of Mr. and Mrs. Twit. From the reader's perspective, the Twits' pranks on each other are easily justifiable, but their treatment of the monkeys is utterly reprehensible. Here lies what Philip Thomson described as "the clash between incompatible reactions" (2). On the one hand, the image of the Muggle-Wumps standing on their heads is quite comic, yet on the other, the torture of the animals is undeniably horrific. The reader's confused reaction in this case is a distinguishing feature of Dahl's grotesque.

Another form of grotesque in *The Twits* is derived from the book's use of language. Dahl is clearly a master at onomatopoeia. Many of his nonsense words precisely reflect the horrible images they were designed to portray:

> "I'll get you for this!" shouted Mrs. Twit. She was floating down right on top of him. She was purple with rage and slashing the air with her long walking stick which she had somehow managed to hang on to all the time. "I'll swish you to a swazzle!" she shouted. "I'll swash you to a swizzle! I'll gnash you to a gnozzle! I'll gnosh you to a

gnazzle!" (31)

The reader may not know the exact meaning of Dahl's words, but their sense is nonetheless implied. Mrs. Twit's language leaves the reader with the distinct impression that someone is going to get a caning.

In the final portion of *The Twits*, Dahl devotes himself entirely to the comic grotesque tradition. The Twits, who were so fond of training the monkeys to stand on their heads, are themselves turned upside down. The principle of hierarchical reversal is prominently featured in Rabelais' imagery. Referring to the customs of the medieval feast, Bakhtin describes the transformation of jester to king, and of clown to bishop. Essentially, this produced a liberating effect from one's daily position in regular society. In *The Twits*, the shifting of the high and the low emphasises the book's anti-authoritarian theme. It is a plot device which frees the Muggle-Wump family from their oppressive captors while teaching the Twits a valuable lesson.

Another important connection to Rabelais is established at the very end of Dahl's story. Because the reader finds it impossible to sympathise with the grotesque figures of Mr. and Mrs. Twit, their demise is ultimately greeted by carnival laughter:

> And one week later, on a nice sunny afternoon, a man called Fred came round to read the gas meter. When nobody answered the door, Fred peeped into the house and there he saw, on the floor of the living room, two bundles of old clothes, two pairs of shoes, and a walking

> stick. There was nothing more left in this world of Mr. and Mrs. Twit.
>
> And everyone, including Fred, shouted ...
>
> "HOORAY!" (76)

The emotion expressed in Dahl's final paragraph does not only refer to the laughter of Fred, or the Muggle-Wumps, or the Roly-Poly Bird; it is essentially the all-encompassing laughter of the readers, or, what Bakhtin terms "the laughter of the people". Its roots date back to the Renaissance folk culture, where "comic monsters were defeated by laughter. Terror was turned into something gay and comic" (Bakhtin 39). In the same manner, the reader laughs at the Twits' death because it represents a general victory over oppression.

In *George's Marvelous Medicine*, the grotesque appears in the character of George's grandmother. From the start, Dahl informs us that "George couldn't help disliking Grandma. She was a selfish grumpy old woman. She had pale brown teeth and a small puckered-up mouth like a dog's bottom" (2). Again Dahl uses Rabelaisian imagery, in this case linking the orifice of the "mouth" with the "bottom". The implication here is that Grandma's utterances are connected with excrement. This is evident from her conversation with George about bugs:

> "Whenever I see a live slug on a piece of lettuce," Grandma said, "I gobble it up quick before it crawls away. Delicious." She squeezed her lips together tight so that her mouth became a tiny wrinkled hole. "Delicious," she

> said again, "Worms and slugs and beetley bugs. You don't know what's good for you." "You're joking, Grandma." "I never joke," she said. "Beetles are perhaps best of all. They go *crunch*!" "Grandma! That's beastly!" The old hag grinned, showing those pale brown teeth. "Sometimes, if you're lucky," she said, "you get a beetle inside the stem of a stick of celery. That's what I like." "Grandma! How *could* you?" "You find all sorts of nice things in sticks of raw celery," the old woman went on. "Sometimes it's earwigs." "I don't want to hear about it!" cried George. "A big fat earwig is very tasty," Grandma said, licking her lips. "But you've got to be quick, my dear, when you put one of those in your mouth. It has a pair of sharp nippers on its back end and if it grabs your tongue with those, it never lets go. So you've got to bite the earwig first, *chop chop*, before it bites you." (6-7)

In this image, Dahl completely overthrows common perceptions about old people. If anything, he demonstrates that George's grandmother has more of the demonic in her than the human. At one point, George even wonders if she might be a witch. Dahl's characterisation of Grandma is a wonderfully sinister, grotesque portrait. Present are both the "fearful" and the "ludicrous" elements which Ruskin discussed. The fearful or horrific element comes across in her physical description; an old hag with repulsive brown teeth and a wrinkled little mouth. The

ludicrous or ridiculous element is perceived through her actions; her appetite for bugs, for instance. Once again, we find both elements coexisting within the same description, thereby causing ambivalence.

In the chapter "Grandma Gets the Medicine", Dahl returns to "the material bodily principle" found in Rabelais. Following her dose of marvellous medicine, George's grandmother experiences several alterations in her physical form:

> Then she began to bulge. She was swelling. She was puffing up all over! Someone was pumping her up, that's how it looked! Was she going to explode? Her face was turning from purple to green! But wait! She had a puncture somewhere! George could hear the hiss of escaping air. She stopped swelling. She was going down. She was slowly getting thinner again, shrinking back and back slowly to her shrivelly old self. (34-35)

The sense of excitement and urgency in Dahl's description is reminiscent of Rabelais' carnival spirit, yet one senses an underlying sadistic pleasure in watching Grandma swell up. This is not the only physical alteration she experiences, however. In another instance, she assumes the shape of a tall, thin creature "as though she were a piece of elastic being pulled upward by invisible hands" (37), Bakhtin interprets this swelling and shrinking as "the feeling of the general relativity of great and small, exalted and lowly, of the fantastic and the real, the physical and the spiritual; the feeling of rising, growing,

flowering, and fading, of the transformation of nature eternally alive" (Bakhtin 142).

This view of the material bodily principle is particularly significant to the final chapter of Dahl's story, which is appropriately entitled "Goodbye, Grandma". Just as George's grandmother had increased in size during an earlier episode, now she begins to shrink:

> By then, Grandma was the size of a matchstick and still shrinking fast. A moment later, she was no bigger than a pin ... Then a pumpkin seed ... Then ...Then... "Where is she?" cried Mrs. Kranky. "I've lost her!" "Hooray," said Mr. Kranky. "She's gone! She's disappeared completely!" cried Mrs. Kranky. "That's what happens to you if you're grumpy and bad-tempered," said Mr. Kranky. "great medicine of yours, George." (87-88)

This passage reflects the fundamental principle of death and renewal discussed in Bakhtin. The process is at once saddening (Mrs. Kranky's interpretation), and joyous (Mr. Kranky's interpretation), however the most complete reaction is summed up by George, who "didn't know what to think" (88). Essentially, what we find in George is a combination of his mother's and father's reactions to Grandma's passing. Although he has been taught by society to regard death as a solemn matter, one instinctively feels that he is secretly pleased with the turn of events.

Of Dahl's many children's books, few have come under attack like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* has. While the comic violence

which runs through the text is popular with children, many adult critics refer to it pejoratively as sadism. In *Charlie*, we are introduced to a series of characters belonging to the Strewwelpeter tradition: Augustus Gloop, a greedy boy; Veruca Salt, a girl who is spoiled by her parents; Violet Beauregarde, a girl who chews gum all day; Mike Teavee, a boy who does nothing but watch television. Each of these figures represents a childhood weakness, and, as one might guess, they are all done away with in the end. Charlie Bucket, the story's protagonist, is essentially faceless, allowing the identity of the reader to be projected onto his character.

Because *Charlie* is intended for an older audience, Dahl can be more explicit with his grotesque imagery. First, we find use of the grotesque in his descriptions of the four nasty children. Augustus Gloop, for example, is "deaf to everything except the call of his enormous stomach" (76). Even the children's names are suggestive of the human vices they portray. Another grotesque device that Dahl uses is the contrast of the comic with the horrific. This is demonstrated in the all of the Oompa Loompa scenes. Following each tragic misadventure, a small chorus of Oompa Loompas appears and begins singing cheerfully about the consequences of disobedience. Part eulogy and part satire, their lyrics almost always express delight in justice having being served:

> "Augustus Gloop!" chanted the Oompa-Loompas.
> "Augustus Gloop! Augustus Gloop! The great big greedy

> nincompoop! How long could we allow this beast To gorge and guzzle, feed and feast On everything he wanted to? Great Scott! It simply wouldn't do! However long this pig might live, We're positive he'd never give Even the smallest bit of fun Or happiness to anyone. (82)

By introducing the Oompa Loompa chorus, Dahl is essentially drawing attention to the disparity between his horrific subject matter and the comic tone in which it is conveyed.

In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Dahl once again relies on Rabelaisian imagery of the human body. This concept is developed in great detail by Hamida Bosmajian in her essay "*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and Other Excremental Visions":

> In the chocolate factory everything can be licked and eaten and consumed, but the orally greedy will also be swallowed, pushed down or sucked up in the great digestive system of Wonka's machinery which finally expels them in altered form (37)

This image of the chocolate factory as a mechanical digestive system is similar to the process of "eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination" in *Rabelais* (Bakhtin 317). What all of these images suggest is a sense of renewal. This is demonstrated in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* through the purging of vice (the expulsion of the naughty children) and its eventual rebirth (their altered physical forms). The principle of renewal can likewise be applied to the character of

Charlie. His rebirth occurs at the end of the story, when he becomes the new heir to Wonka's chocolate factory.

In her criticism of *Charlie,* Bosmajian makes an excellent observation about the appeal of Dahl's story:

> Children respond gleefully to *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* not only because it is a luxurious food fantasy, but also because it is a fantasy of aggression expressed frequently in terms of bathroom humour. This sweet book is quite nasty. (40)

What Bosmajian implies is that in the act of reading, children can work through their feelings of anger and frustration in a harmless manner. This psychological aspect is an integral part of Dahl's grotesque which we will examine next.

To understand Dahl's grotesque from the point of view of the child, one is required to have some knowledge of the principles of children's humour. In her book on the subject, Martha Wolfenstein lists the elements of children's humour:

> We have seen how children find ways of making fun of the bigness, power, and prerogatives of the grown-ups whom they envy. There is another imposing aspect of adults, which is often oppressive and fearful to children, namely their moral authority; and here too children seek relief through mockery. They seize with delight on opportunities to show that the grown-ups are not infallibly

> good, or to expose the grown-ups' demands as absurdly impossible, or to distort the meaning of a prohibition into a permission. (Martha Wolfenstein, *Children's Humour*, 45)

Up to this point, we have seen the many ways in which Dahl flouts taboos and diminishes moral authority: through hierarchical reversals, debased characterisations, and mocking laughter. Clearly, he aligns himself with the tastes and preferences of his young readers, and their delight in the grotesque becomes his delight.

Notes

[1] David Rees, "Dahl's Chickens" p.146

Conclusion

Throughout the history of the grotesque, two opposing views have always existed: the Vitruvian and Vasarian positions. They are carried over into the modern period, appearing in the theories of Kayser and Bakhtin, and their regulations and standards govern critical interpretation of Dahl's work. Central to their positions is the notion that the grotesque can either be perceived as a restrictive, irregular force, or as a liberating, positive one. One of the main reasons for differing interpretations of the grotesque is that the genre itself is ambivalent. Adding to its problematic nature are the many forms it is capable of assuming: ornamentation, caricature, burlesque, and farce. What differentiates these different species of grotesque is the relationship between the comic and horrific elements.

In Dahl's work, the comic element of the grotesque is the dominant force. It manifests itself in the author's characterisations, plot devices and language. It also has much in common with the medieval carnival laughter of Bakhtin. Both forms are 'non-official', 'communal', and 'positive'. Along these lines, Dahl's work achieves further depth and meaning when one considers the cathartic effect of the grotesque. By poking fun at adults, Dahl's stories provide the child with a counter culture to the everyday world: the culture of childhood. Within this circle, the grotesque can be interpreted as a means of overcoming anxiety and oppression in a world governed by adult authority.

From our study of the comic grotesque in Roald Dahl, it becomes apparent that several of the critical attacks on the author were perhaps unfounded. Literary critics, such as Eleanor Cameron, never explored the nature of their remarks when they denounced Dahl's stories as "violent", "sadistic", and "cruel". Had they interpreted his stories in light of the comic grotesque, they would have discovered that the darker elements are always undercut by humour. Clearly, many of Dahl's critics adopted a narrow or limited interpretation of his work. Also, they erroneously viewed his stories from an adult's perspective. The fact that Dahl's comic grotesque is derived from the same roots as Rabelaisian folk humour demonstrates that it must be interpreted in a positive, regenerative sense. In this same manner, if any value is to be ascribed to Dahl's children's stories, they must ultimately be viewed in terms of their grotesque influence, not in terms of 'taste' or 'appropriateness".

Works Cited and Consulted

Primary Works

Fairy Tales, Story Books and Collections of Verse for Children

Bannerman, Helen. The Jumbo Sambo Including: The Story of Little Black Sambo; the Story of Sambo and the Twins; the Story of Little Black Quasha; the Story of Little Black Bobtail; the Story of the Teasing Monkey; the Story of Little Kettle Head. New York: Stokes, 1942.

Baring-Gould, William S., and Ceil Baring-Gould, eds. The Annotated Mother Goose: Nursery Rhymes Old and New. New York: Bramhall House, 1962.

Belloc, Hilaire. Hilaire Belloc's Cautionary Verses. New York: Knopf, 1945.

Dahl, Roald. Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Toronto: Bantam Skylark, 1977.

---. Dirty Beasts. London: Puffin, 1986.

---. George's Marvelous Medicine. Toronto: Bantam Skylark, 1983.

---. Rhyme Stew. London: Penguin, 1990.

---. Roald Dahl's Revolting Rhymes. New York: Puffin, 1995.

---. The Twits. New York: Puffin, 1991.

Grimm, Jakob, and Wilhelm Grimm. The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales. New York: Pantheon, 1972.

Hoffman, Heinrich. Struwwelpeter: Merry Stories and Funny Pictures. New York: Warne, 1957.

Autobiographies

Dahl, Roald. Boy: Tales of Childhood. New York: Puffin, 1984.

---. Going Solo. London: Jonathan Cape, 1986.

Secondary Works

Biographies

Treglown, Jeremy. Roald Dahl: A Biography. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1994.

West, Mark I. Roald Dahl. New York: Twayne; Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan Canada; New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992.

Interviews

West, Mark I. "Interview with Roald Dahl." Children's Literature in Education 21 (1990): 61-66.

---. Trust Your Children: Voices Against Censorship in Children's Literature. New York: Neal-Schuman, 1988.

Wintle, Justin, and Emma Fisher. The Pied Pipers: Interviews with the Influential Creators of Children's Literature. New York: Paddington, 1974.

Critical Studies - Children's Literature

Bettelheim, Bruno. The Uses of Enchantment. New York: Random, 1976.

Bosmajian, Hamida. "*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and Other Excremental Visions." Lion and the Unicorn: A Critical Journal of Children's Literature 9 (1985): 36-49.

Cameron, Eleanor. "McLuhan, Youth, and Literature." Horn Book Magazine Oct. 1972, Dec. 1972, and Feb. 1973.

---. "A Question of Taste." Children's Literature in Education 21 (1976): 59-63.

Culley, Jonathon. "Roald Dahl - It's About Children and It's for Children - But Is It Suitable?" Children's Literature in Education 22 (1991): 59-73.

Cullingford, Cedric. "The Exuberant Incorrectness of Roald Dahl." Children's Literature and its Effects: The Formative Years. London: Cassell, 1998. 153-66.

Freeman, Thomas. "Heinrich Hoffman's *Struwwelpeter*: An Inquiry into the Effects of Violence in Children's Literature." Journal of Popular Culture 10 (1977): 808-20.

Kamenetsky, Christa. The Brothers Grimm and Their Critics: Folktales and the Quest for Meaning. Athens: Ohio UP, 1992.

Lurie, Alison. Don't Tell the Grown-ups: Subversive Children's Literature. Boston: Little, 1990.

Luthi, Max. Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales. Trans. Lee Chadeayne and Paul Gottwald. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976.

McCreesh, John. "Children's Ideas of Horror and Tragedy." The Cool Web: The Pattern of Children's Reading. Eds. Margaret Meek, Aidan Warlow, and Griselda Barton. London: Bodley Head, 1977. 112-20.

Merrick, Anne. "*The Nightwatchmen* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* As Books To Be Read To Children." Children's Literature in Education 16 (1975): 21-30.

Rees, David. "Dahl's Chickens: Roald Dahl." Children's Literature in Education 19 (1988): 143-55.

Sarland, Charles. "*The Secret Seven* vs *The Twits*: Cultural Clash or Cosy Combination?" Signal 42 (1983): 155-71.

Silvey, Anita, ed. Children's Books and Their Creators. Boston: Houghton, 1995.

Storr, Catherine. "Things That Go Bump in the Night." The Cool Web: The Pattern of Children's Reading. Eds. Margaret Meek, Aidan Warlow, and Griselda Barton. London: Bodley Head, 1977. 120-28.

Tomlinson, Carl. "Justifying Violence in Children's Literature." Battling Dragons: Issues and Controversy in Children's Literature. Ed. Susan Lehr. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995. 39-50.

West, Mark I. "The Grotesque and the Taboo in Roald Dahl's Humorous Writings for Children." Children's Literature Association Quarterly 15 (1990): 115-16.

Zipes, Jack. The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Critical Studies - Grotesque

Bakhtin, Mikhail. Rabelais and His World. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.

Barasch, Frances K. The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings. The Hague: Mouton, 1971,

Buren, M.B. "The Grotesque in Visual Art and Literature." Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters 12 (1982): 42-53.

Clark, John R. The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1991.

Clayborough, Arthur. The Grotesque in English Literature. Oxford: Clarendon, 1967.

Ganim, John M. "Medieval Literature as Monster: The Grotesque Before and After Bakhtin." Exemplaria 7 (1995): 27-40.

Guerlac, Suzanne. "Delights of Grotesque and Sublime." Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism 15 (1985): 47-53.

Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982.

Jajte, Irena. "The Structure of the Grotesque - An Introductory Analysis." Zagadnienia Rodzajow Literackich 32 (1989): 65-81.

Kayser, Wolfgang. The Grotesque in Art and Literature. Trans. Ulrich Weisstein. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968.

Khouri, Nadia. "The Grotesque: Archeology of an Anti-Code." Zagadnienia Rodzajow Literackich 23 (1980): 5-24.

McElroy, Bernard. Fiction of the Modern Grotesque. Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989.

Meyer, Michael J., ed. Literature and the Grotesque. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995.

O'Neill, Patrick. "The Comedy of Entropy: The Contexts of Black Humour." Canadian Review of Comparative Literature 10 (1983): 145-66.

Ruskin, John. The Stones of Venice. Vol. 3. London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1907.

Steig, Michael. "Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis." Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 29 (1970): 253-60.

Thomson, Philip. The Grotesque. London: Methuen, 1972.

Critical Studies - Miscellaneous

Wolfenstein, Martha. Children's Humor: A Psychological Analysis. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1954.