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# Uncovering the Grotesque in Fiction by Alice Munro and Gabrielle Roy

LORNA HUTCHISON

THE GROTESQUE AESTHETIC is at play in a diversity of fiction of the last two hundred years, including Jeremias Gotthelf's *The Black Spider* (1842), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), and numerous works by Flannery O'Connor in the mid-twentieth century, to name only a few. Today, the grotesque is a part of the art of many of Canada's authors and has burgeoned over the last forty years into such an important aesthetic — and strategy, as I will describe it here — in this country's body of works that the literary theory that helps readers, critics, and teachers to explore the many concerns, processes, and, most importantly here, effects of the literature has not kept up with its developments. The prominence of the grotesque and the doors it opens to questions of spirituality, ethics, ways of knowing, and so much more, prompts the research question What does and does not “qualify” as literature of the grotesque?

Consider two quintessential characteristics of the grotesque: duality and deformity. In the *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, for example, the divided nature and deformity of Stevenson's Jekyll-Hyde character clearly fulfills these criteria, right down to the contradiction of Jekyll-Hyde's ominous smile: “Mr. Hyde was pale and dwarfish, he gave an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation, he had a displeasing smile” (17). One of the authors under study here, Alice Munro, creates the aesthetic through depicting contradictory states of life and death, or life and terminal illness. Munro creates “events,” as Bakhtin writes of the grotesque body, in which “the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven” (317). Thus, in the short story “The Love of a Good Woman,” for example, readers have to try and reconcile two radically different states of being with regard to one person — a person Munro depicts in full life with startling detail and then as either dying from a horrific, deforming disease (Mrs. Quinn) or as having been murdered (Mr. Willens). But what also creates an effect

of the grotesque in readers is the way the horrors of their characters' states of death mirror the most unbecoming aspects of their nature and existence in life. Hence Mr. Willens, optometrist, whose mouth in his final death throes dribbles pink blood in colour and form "like when the froth comes up when you're boiling the strawberries to make jam," and from which emerges a final note "*Glug-glug*" (58), becomes reduced in death in much the same way his libidinous "sucking and dribbling" over his farmhouse client reduced the "dirty old brute" (60) in her eyes (if not the readers').

The stories of Stevenson and Munro are grotesque because of their strategic use of contradiction, as well as the presence of many other characteristics of the aesthetic: for instance, absurdity, exaggeration, and the irrational. However, since there are stories that contain these same elements yet are not grotesque, what is it indeed that makes a story grotesque? And what of literature that seems grotesque but which nevertheless generates doubt on the part of readers as to its status? Finally, in light of the explosion over the last thirty-five years of Canadian fiction that "employs" the aesthetic and the fact that theorists of the grotesque have always cited the elusive nature of the term, in what other way can we define the grotesque?<sup>1</sup>

Many of Canada's writers have employed the grotesque aesthetic in one manner or another, including Alistair MacLeod, Barbara Gowdy, Gail Anderson-Dargatz, Hiromi Goto, Marie-Claire Blais, Leonard Cohen, and Michael Ondaatje. Two of the country's most prominent and prolific writers, Alice Munro<sup>2</sup> and Gabrielle Roy, integrate into their narratives many of the major elements of the grotesque as established by theorists. Yet, one writer's fiction is grotesque while the other's, in large part, is not. A comparison of the darkest, most disturbing elements in Roy's *The Tin Flute*, *The Cashier*, and *Enchanted Summer* with Munro's short story "Fits" is helpful in illuminating the differences between fiction in which the grotesque aesthetic functions (Munro's), and fiction in which the reader is never quite placed in the realm of the grotesque (Roy's). This is not to say that one author's work is more complex than the other's, or that indeterminacy and its family of characteristics associated with the grotesque elevates fiction of the grotesque over Roy's or other kinds of literatures. Nor is it to say, categorically, that Gabrielle Roy's work is not grotesque. Several of Roy's early short stories, for example, published in small magazines in the 1940s, certainly contain

grotesque images,<sup>3</sup> although they lack the sophistication of the author's later fiction.<sup>4</sup> A study of Roy's well-known work,<sup>5</sup> however, provides the opportunity to define the grotesque through what it "is not" rather than through what it is.

Because the strategies of the grotesque I outline here are so entirely typical of Munro's writing, and because the story "Fits" offers a rich spectrum concerning the characteristics of the grotesque discussed here, I have grounded this comparison in a single story by Munro in relation to three works by Roy. In fact, the fiction examined here brings to the research question of what is and is not grotesque a fitting match and mismatch. On the one hand, Munro and Roy are in so many ways different writers. Munro deals in the intricacies of human nature and a realism that develops through the extraordinary detail of place and person amidst a mire of ambiguity; in contrast, the consciousness of Roy's realist fiction often centers on social and psychological concerns (poverty, alienation, urban and cultural change, etc.). On the other hand, the writings of both contain elements of the grotesque — identical ingredients and, at times, strategies — that point to similar concerns and aesthetic effects, despite the difference in the overall outcome of the respective fiction. Moreover, the fact that Roy engages with the grotesque only to, as I argue, turn away from the aesthetic before allowing its full effect to become realized is in itself a rich subject of exploration, and one of which I consider the "how" more than the "why."

In relation to this last point, the comparison between Munro's story and those by Roy points to a fundamental aspect of the grotesque, one which I term "hiddenness." Let us return to *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* for an initial illustration, and to draw the link between an effect of hiddenness that occurs not only to a story's character, in this case the lawyer Mr. Utterson, but also to its readers. Unaware that Mr. Hyde is in actuality the well-respected Dr. Jekyll transformed through an ill-fated experiment, Mr. Utterson observes the many repugnant qualities of Mr. Hyde without being able to put his finger on what really disturbs him about the man: Mr. Hyde had

borne himself to the lawyer with a sort of murderous mixture of timidity and boldness [:] . . . all these were points against him, but not all these together could explain the hitherto unknown disgust,

loathing and fear with which Mr. Utterson regarded him. "There must be something else," said the perplexed gentleman. "There is something more, if I could find a name for it." (17)

Like the effect of Mr. Hyde's presence in Stevenson's story, something within the grotesque aesthetic reaches in and strokes a sense within readers that alerts us to the prospect of violence, the danger of the unknown and of our curiosity toward what is both bizarre and inexplicable. However, the name of that something often remains just out of reach.

Although critics have not categorized the aesthetic as such until now, I argue that the grotesque aesthetic is a narrative strategy, and hiddenness and duality its principal components. The grotesque functions through opposition, and what Geoffrey Galt Harpham calls the "ambivalent emotional reactions" (8) of readers. Thus, faced with an element in grotesque fiction that is both familiar and unfamiliar, readers may respond with ambivalence, a feeling of being "torn in two" because of simultaneous feelings of attraction and repulsion. The grotesque aesthetic exists only as long as some form of opposition continues, and a paradoxical balance is sustained. This means that if utter confusion dominates in a text, for example, then the equilibrium between order and disorder is upset, in which case the grotesque aesthetic collapses. When theorists of the grotesque, such as Wolfgang Kayser, emphasize the grotesque as the absurd and estranged, or the low (Robert Doty's argument<sup>6</sup>), we lose sight of the dual nature of this literary strategy, and the very "state" of the grotesque escapes us.

If we are to envision how the grotesque works through the concepts of paradox and ambivalence in literature — concepts that are themselves dual in structure rather than singular — then we must maintain the double-mode of the grotesque aesthetic in our approach to it. What is required, therefore, is a manner of examining the grotesque that can accommodate the following statement:

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

My definition marks a shift from Philip Thomson's statement that the grotesque is "*the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response*" (27) by stressing the opposition inherent in the aesthetic and its sustained positive and negative elements. As a means of illuminating the grotesque state of "it is this, and it is the negation of this," I will

draw loosely on the system of *via negativa*, particularly as outlined by David Williams in *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*. The act of affirmation (“the grotesque is”) and subsequent denial (“the grotesque is-not”) are the very acts involved in paradox and ambivalence. The pull of reason in two opposite directions that occurs when readers confront a paradox or other “doubled” problem is a way for thought to transcend the limits of a one-sided solution. “When ‘yes’ turns into ‘no,’” Anne Carson writes of the “transformations” of denial, “there is a sudden vanishing and a shift to meaning, there is a tilt and realignment of the listener’s world-view” (4). In order to examine the grotesque aesthetic, it is necessary to move from the limitations of affirmation to negation where we may recognize a condition of contrariety within a single, singular statement.

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

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

In other words, the grotesque is the means “to bring the reader up short, jolt him out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective” (Thomson 58), obliging readers not only to take another look at what they are presented with in a work of fiction, but also to change the way in which they habitually perceive a concept. An author accomplishes this feat through aesthetic devices, such as “paradox, distortion or degradation, and the clash of seemingly incompatible elements, all of which evoke a reader’s heightened sense of awareness” (Corey 32). Once readers have read a passage that is grotesque, so the theory goes, the sensation of discomfort provoked by the aesthetic typically leads readers to grasp what they have read in a new and revealing manner.

Corey’s theoretical summary of the grotesque points us, so far, to the effects of the aesthetic upon readers; Alice Munro’s writing provides us with an example of the aesthetic at work in fiction. In Munro’s short story “Fits,” readers are in the presence of the grotesque when things

don't "fit" together at all. The collision of the functional and the dysfunctional not only creates an eruption (an earthquake, a fit) for the townspeople and, consequently, for readers, but unveils the fact that, in Munro's setting, the potential for such a "periodic fit" (164) is always present, and is, in fact, a part of everyday life.

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

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

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

The grotesque atmosphere in "Fits," however, is one wherein there is a continual potential for bad things to happen, for even once the initial fit of violence has taken place next door, a menace continues to underlie everything common in Gilmore. It is as though the townspeople have tapped into a dangerous source that had always been accessible — a part of their lives — but that had remained dormant, or suppressed, beneath daily routine and chatter about the weather: "in Gilmore . . . assurances are supposed to be repeated, and in fact much of conversation is repetition, a sort of dance of good intentions, without surprises" (140). Robert, the neighbour of the unfortunate Weebles, has always sensed

an unseen danger, couched in the safety of repetition: "Just occasionally, talking to people, he feels something else, an obstruction, and isn't sure what it is (malice? stubbornness?) but it's like a rock at the bottom of a river when you're swimming — the clear water lifts you over it" (140).<sup>7</sup>

Munro diverts readers from the crime scene to its "after-shock," manifested in the townspeople's reactions. Readers thus move involuntarily from the carnage of the murder-suicide to the incessant buzzing of the townspeople attracted by its smell. As a result of this delay — the temporary masking of the crime scene — as well as the threatening atmosphere and irreconcilable elements that are not resolved in Munro's story, readers may feel uncomfortable and scramble to alleviate a sense of both curiosity and unease. Out of the readers' confusion the possibility of transformation, even transcendence, may appear, for as Harpham points out, "Confused things rouse the mind to new inventions."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, "the essential paradox of the grotesque," writes Thomson, is "that it is both liberating and tension-producing at the same time" (61).

But how, in a literary analysis, do we represent the grotesque while maintaining, rather than reducing, the paradox of the grotesque? How can we avoid the problem that the grotesque is, in Susan Corey's words, "easier to describe than to define" (32)? To speak through assertion, that is, to say that the grotesque in Munro "is this," the grotesque "is that," is to risk overlooking its other facets and diminishing its complexity. Williams writes:

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

Theorists certainly define the grotesque through the structure of binary opposition, that is, the juxtaposition of two opposites (such as normal/abnormal) that create an effect upon the reader. Yet, although binary opposition is a two-sided structure, criticism of the grotesque almost

inevitably views one side as the dominant, the other as its inferior. Thus, Corey writes that the grotesque is “Anti-rational by nature” (32), rather than both rational and anti-rational, and that it functions to “undermine the status-quo,” instead of also reinforcing it as a perpetually dialectic strategy. Similarly, Ralph Ciancio writes that the grotesque is a world in which “the categories of a rational and familiar order fuse, collapse, and finally give way to the absurd” (1). And according to Kayser, the grotesque is a world that suddenly becomes “ESTRANGED” (184), a “changed world” that does not retain its naturalness or familiarity (185). The “laws” of binary opposition, that “two poles must not only be opposed to each other but must also be in exclusive opposition to each other” (“Binary”) reinforce the manner in which such theorists, in their definition of the grotesque, lean toward either mutual exclusion or the relegation of one side of a grotesque dichotomy to a lesser position of importance.

In Munro’s story, however, the familiar world is inextricably linked to the unfamiliar; it exists only through its darker sphere, and vice versa. The town of Gilmore is in a state where the “demonic” is always present, only hidden. I am drawn to Derrida’s theorizing of the term “*différance*,” which he describes as a thing that loses its essence when revealed, like a mystery that can no longer qualify as such once a solution has been unearthed: “Any exposition would expose it to disappearing as a disappearance” Derrida contends. “It would risk appearing, thus disappearing” (134). Indeed, Derrida mentions the similarity between his method of *différance* and negative theology (134). The method of representation of *via negativa* lies at the origin of the grotesque sign (Williams 4-5) and can, even when applied loosely as it is here, accommodate the aesthetic in “elastic,” adaptable terms for the theorist of the grotesque.

The system of *via negativa* in theology applies to a manner of approaching the divine by moving beyond the human system of words or signs — beyond language — since “God transcends human knowledge utterly and can be known only by what He is not” (Williams 5). Negative theology, Peter Haidu writes, is a way to “deploy modes of discourse that acknowledge divinity without presentifying it” (278). Williams shows that, as a mediaeval sign, the monstrous (the grotesque) could evoke more about the divine through difference and through what the divine is-not (God as a two-headed squid becomes God is not a two-headed squid, for example) than could a symbol of affirmation.

In the process of *via negativa*, naming God as something He is not is a recognition of the inadequacy of affirmation to communicate not just the wholeness of God, but also the non-representability of God. There is a paradox involved in the act of acknowledging God through human language.

In *via negativa*, one begins by building up a subject (such as being) with assertions — often absurd assertions — in order to question whether reason and intellect are sufficient to evoke the essence of things (Williams 5). Once the assertive statements have been made (God symbolized as a two-headed squid), the subject is then “dismantled” through negation (God is-not a two-headed squid):

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

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

I think, therefore, that we can start with the affirmative (Munro is grotesque) move to the negative (Roy is not grotesque) and end with a “sense” of the multiple aspects of what we are trying to know. We will thus use words to move beyond language to the realm of the aesthetic.

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

mothering and poverty meet at more points of tension. As they construct each other they are twisted into a macabre union under

the pressure of the social system. Rose-Anna cannot sew clothing fast enough to keep all her children attending school, nor feed them well enough to stave off hunger and illness. . . . As martyr, Rose-Anna constructs her family's experience of poverty by taking it inside herself, as far as possible, and transforming its ugliness, its shamefully diseased and grotesque outsider nature in a mothering gesture. (81)

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

Roy's novel is a work of social realism, as Rimstead illustrates. The grotesque, as critic Tim Libretti shows (and as a novel such as *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry illustrates), can exist in this category of realist fiction. Libretti writes that "the proletarian grotesque enables authors to represent the very normal and real horrors and monstrosities of everyday working-class life under capitalism, which otherwise might be too difficult and painful to rehearse without the buffer of laughter and the anodyne of genuine hope" (172-73).<sup>9</sup> Libretti's reading of grotesque writing through the "proletarian grotesque" shares the view with my own reading of *The Tin Flute* that class difference becomes horrifying when it is shown to be familiar or normal. However, Roy does not invoke the grotesque as a "buffer of laughter" to ease the hard reality of the society she portrays. She does not seek to distance "the reader from the familiar situation . . . to force the reader to reflect on the situation she normally takes for granted because of its familiarity" (Libretti 173) by revealing and concealing elements. Are readers, for example, prompted to move ahead on their own to try and fill in gaps in the narrative by trying to reconcile what cannot be reconciled? Roy's narrative does not use concealment as a strategy in the depiction of grotesque elements (such as the demands of endless chores); it involves, instead, a strategy of revelation.

In *The Tin Flute*, there is a refusal of the grotesque aesthetic, a refusal to leave things unsaid or unconnected. When Rose-Anna leaves the hospital after visiting her six-year-old son Daniel, who is dying of leukaemia, having been shut out from the community of caregivers who

speak only English, having only sensed rather than fully understood the nature of Daniel's illness (which is terminal), and after having borne the sting of the affection shown by her son toward the paid nurse, the narrative reveals in clear terms the source of Rose-Anna's predicament. That source is poverty:

Rose-Anna was in the dark corridor. Her step was hesitant because of the feeble light and her fear that she wouldn't find the exit. One thought filled her mind with reproach: Daniel had all he needed here. He had never been so happy. She didn't understand it and tried to find the reason. A sentiment with the taste of poison stuck in her throat. So they've taken him from me too, she thought, and it's easy to take him, he's so small! . . . Never had she felt her poverty so intensely. (228)

In view of the various forms of social wealth that surround Rose-Anna and which point to a shocking unequal distribution of power (and thus the contrast of poverty with wealth), Rose-Anna's situation is absurd and excessive, both of which, when paired with their polar opposite, are characteristics of the grotesque. However, the tension generated through features of absurdity and excessiveness is deflated by Roy's gestures of containment when Rose-Anna is faced with the hideous claims made by the disease upon Daniel's little body. Her shame is framed — and thus exposed and contained — within an absurd contradiction whereby the health system tells Rose-Anna what she must do in order to be a responsible mother while failing to provide (and indeed obstructing) the means with which she might meet the needs of her family: "She remembered that they'd talked at the clinic about the right kind of diet to make sure the bones and teeth were properly formed and to ensure good health. What a joke! And they'd said that kind of food was within the reach of every budget! They had shown her clearly what her duty was" (219). Social ills are mapped out in clear terms of "duty," "deficiencies," "shame," and "illness." Certainly, such unambiguous mapping is one of the particular aims of the social realism Roy creates, and includes emphasizing an age-old mystery: the difficulty of survival (a difficulty that has existed since time began independent of Rose-Anna's particular society and infrastructures). It is not the genre of social realism itself, however, that determines whether irresolution or ambiguity can exist within a narrative, or whether these may surround the sources of the social ills Roy illuminates. The manner in which Roy

thwarts the possibility of a grotesque effect, which relies on confusion (Harpham 191) to muddle and disturb readers and to incite curiosity and dissatisfaction, is a narrative strategy not dictated by the literary genre (realism) of which it is a part, but is rather an integral element of Roy's own powerful strategy.

When Rose-Anna embarks on a new search for a house to rent, angry with the realization that "the bigger the family, the smaller and darker grew their lodgings" (93), therein lie the irreconcilable elements, and thus the ingredients for the grotesque — the growth of a family (encouraged by Church and State, and indeed, by an inadequate health system) and the lack of a protective, decent abode for it: "Springtime! What had it ever meant to her? In her married life it had meant two things: being pregnant and going out pregnant, to look for a place to live" (93).<sup>10</sup> Mothering and poverty do indeed form a binary opposition. However, the dominating principle of social inequality — dominating because it is depicted as the root of the union of mothering and poverty (Rimstead 81) — overrides the play (the gaps and inconsistencies) of grotesque elements in the novel. In other words, the dominance of one concept forms a hierarchy that the grotesque aesthetic cannot accommodate.

In contrast, Munro's story provides no term or logic to contain the disturbing outbreaks in this story: they are only "freak occurrences." It is not just a matter of a neighbour who has violently killed his wife, but rather, a matter of an entire, all-consuming spasm that takes over all aspects of town life, destabilizing labels such as "victim" and "perpetrator," or notions of safety, neutrality, and distance. "The interval of the grotesque" writes Harpham, "is the one in which, although we have recognized a number of different forms in the object, we have not yet developed a clear sense of the *dominant* principle that defines it and organizes its various elements (16). Unlike *The Tin Flute*, violence and freak behaviour in "Fits" is not determined by or attributed to socio-economic, or psychological, or even physiological, conditions. When Robert listens to the various theories as to the cause of the double death — loss of money, cancer, Alzheimer's disease — he feels that if he could only believe one of them "it would have been as if something had taken its claws out of his chest and permitted him to breathe" (156).

A novel, then, that contains several "grotesque elements" is not neces-

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

Munro engages the reader in a strategy of concealment from the very beginning of her story, when she announces a double death and then immediately covers up the news with a brilliantly banal description of the deceased (137). Suppression of the absurd and the abominable ensures their very presence; aberrant behaviour is, in some strange and alarming way, simultaneously the norm. The deviant is portrayed as something that is merely kept in check, covered up by idle chatter and repetition; but its potential to emerge is always present. That space of potential, of possibility, becomes an operation of the grotesque, attracting and repulsing readers, and sets this story apart from the lack of hiddenness in Roy’s novel.

Even when abnormal behaviour rears its monstrous head in “Fits,” in what seems to be a lapse into total absurdity, there is always an evocation of an antithetical element to ensure that binary opposition is kept in a permanent state of tension. Characters like Robert and the townspeople are ambivalent — they harbour within them co-existing, contradictory emotions and attitudes, though they shield many of these from themselves and others in their daily interactions.

In the context of what is happening in the short story, in which a whole town has erupted over the murder-suicide, Robert’s and Lee’s “argument split open” (166), for example, is a mini-event within a larger one. They reflect each other perfectly in that they are about people in whom sympathy and loathing co-exist, and point to the shocking,

unnerving suggestion that the scale could tip for anyone at any moment. Robert's ability to push his relationship to the extreme is no different from that of the townspeople who have now transformed into hybrid creatures, half human, the same yet the same no longer, who drive up and down the street in front of the house where the deaths of the Weebles has taken place. "Inside those cars were just the same people, probably the very same people he [Robert] had been talking to during the afternoon. But now they seemed joined to their cars, making some new kind of monster that came poking around in a brutally curious way" (165). The deformations that Robert, Lee, the townspeople in their cars, the Weebles, and especially, Peg, undergo in Munro's short story are part of a process of uncovering in which Munro, paradoxically, triggers a loss of what the reader can grasp — a loss of familiarity, a loss of structure in the disorder of Gilmore. Peg, for example, in a typical body-grotesque inversion of inside and outside, literally wears through the blood smear on her parka the normally concealed "insides" of the Weebles' bodies. What is more, Peg inadvertently moves the "intimacy" of the blood smear from the private home to the public sphere in much the same way that the killings (and the agent of them) have transformed the private relationship between a couple into public fodder. The continual, non-resolved covering and uncovering of perverse or shocking behaviour, and the illumination or inversion of things normally unseen, perpetuates the cycle of attraction and repulsion in readers who are obliged to search for insight outside the realm of reason.

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

[147]) serve to develop the abjection that breaks apart Alexandre's life, loss of form is less sustained than it is in Munro's short story.

Alexandre leaves his familiar bank cage for a vacation at Lac Vert in Quebec, sick from the indifference of the city and from a cancer as yet unknown to him. Familiar shapes turn unfamiliar as Alexandre becomes more and more alienated in his environment:

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

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

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

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

Like Alexandre, Robert sees shapes unrecognizable and deformed to

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

In contrast, in *The Cashier*, ambiguity remains a conceit, but it is tempered. The narrator intervenes to minimize the distressing effects of the unknown upon the reader — to speak and fill the absences that surround the mysteries of death and illness. Of course, the questions Roy places before us that relate to Alexandre’s anguish are unanswerable, hence the possibility that the reader will feel discomfort when faced with Alexandre’s physical degeneration. The closer Alexandre approaches death, for example, the more he becomes aware that, paradoxically, he needs his health “to perform an act of absolute sincerity” and face with dignity his own demise (255). Yet, the narrator draws connections that would have otherwise — if left unsaid — served to destabilize readers even more.

At the conclusion of the novel, despite a horrible period of pain and disease through which Alexandre passes and which ensures the continuing presence of ambiguity, the narrator’s words function to reassure readers. Alexandre dies feeling that his life on earth is of significance; with his death comes a “tenderness for human beings which goes furthest beyond the bounds of reason” (276). Like the trees, so frightening in one moment, yet harmless in the next, deformity in *The Cashier* is neither absolute nor permanent. Rather, loss of form undergoes a positive transformation or dissipates, to an extent, when the narrator uncovers some authoritative truth, such as “the good sense, the perfect dignity of death” (264). In “La représentation du corps dans Alexandre Chenevert,”<sup>11</sup> Marie-Pierre Andron writes that even though Alexandre’s torments cannot be reduced to a mere symbol of the suffering human body, Roy’s ending stands as a message of hope, solidarity and — most “offensive” to the grotesque aesthetic — reconciliation:

Alexandre Chenevert est la part de nous-mêmes qui échappe au calcul et à la raison humaine. S'il y a une leçon à tirer d'Alexandre Chenevert, c'est peut-être la suivante: il faut troquer la beauté et l'idéal du corps contre la vérité, le rétablissement du dialogue avec soi et les autres. La connaissance du langage de son corps, la solidarité des corps humains entre eux peuvent nous faire retrouver le lien si ténu de la solidarité humaine, chère à Gabrielle Roy.<sup>12</sup> (135)

Similarly, Yolande Roy-Cyr and Claude della Zazzera sense Roy's empathy for her protagonist (109) which becomes evident, they write, in the positive evolution Alexandre undergoes on his death bed, where "se tissent enfin ensemble les fibres de son être" (121).<sup>13</sup> While I believe that the shocking quality of Alexandre's torments does not disappear with the insight he and his companions gain in the hospital, Roy's artful narrative displays, nevertheless, a resistance to the ambiguous and a tendency toward closure. For whether it be it in the hospital, where "L'intégrité du moi est atteinte" (Roy-Cyr 121) or there where "God reigned in his most ambiguous aspect" (*Cashier* 147), at Lac Vert, where to Alexandre "solitude spoke the consoling language of indifference. The trees bent over, told Alexandre that they lived for a time, died, were replaced and that this was all for the good" (*Cashier* 148); Roy's significant connections prevent the grotesque aesthetic from operating. Readers thereby experience Roy's exquisite treatment of death's dark corridors and the painful beauty of mortality through various unequivocal anchors.

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

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

This chapter, entitled "The Dead Child," is the third last of nineteen vignette-like segments that describe a summer stay of the narrator and her husband in the Quebec countryside. Although the novel is full of encounters between the female narrator and nature, in which she observes the struggle for survival and the harsh, unforgiving lessons of life, "The Dead Child" is a startling episode in the novel and, as

François Ricard aptly points out, stands as “one of the most striking in all of Gabrielle Roy’s works” (110).

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

With a disturbing memory that interrupts a vacationer’s quiet contemplation amid a novel “filled with light and innocence, in which frogs talk, trees sing, animals and humans fraternize” (Ricard 432) comes the sense that the novel verges on the grotesque aesthetic. Yet, I would argue that Roy enacts what could be called a fascinating veering away from the grotesque even in this chapter. Despite the discrepancy between a child and the signs of death embodied by the flies, where is to be found a loss of order and logic that would send the reader into the realm of the irrational? Transformed in death, the girl has indeed undergone a loss of form, yet readers arrive only after the transformation, and after the few final lines of the section preceding “The Dead Child” have warned readers of the inescapable brevity of life (108-09). Thus, readers only encounter Yolande once they cannot become entrapped in a conflict of what was as opposed to what is. We do not, for example, witness Yolande resisting death, or losing her sense of self in an abject body. When the teacher encourages the children to tell her (and thus readers) about what the little girl was like in life, the information serves to open “the poor little doors deep within” the students, and help them to accept their loss, “in their eyes the memory of a pleasant image” (116). In Munro’s “Fits,” readers arrive after the death of the Weebles, yet the effects of the horror of their death continue to snowball, marking the murder-suicide as the beginning of escalating absurd behaviour. Roy, on the contrary, attempts to suppress the spread of grief and confusion,

setting up a series of events that demonstrate a rejection of the grotesque aesthetic.

Tuberculosis, a common and indiscriminate killer, is named as the cause of the loss to the community; the little girl is presented as its passive victim. Although Yolande's death may generate shock waves of violence upon the community that has to deal with it, the teacher's role is to contain the negative effects of the disease upon the survivors as best she can. The consequences of her efforts are revealed through the psychological stages of the children, described in detail by the narrator: "I now understood that the expression in their eyes that I had taken for indifference was a heavy sadness" (113); and later: "they now felt a trust so complete in me it terrified me" (115). The "bitter sadness of the morning" dissipates with the unofficial ceremony of the roses (117), and even the expression of the deceased child is translated into terms readers may understand: "In death the child looked as if she were regretting some poor little joy she had never known" (115). The engagement in ceremony accompanied by the steadiness of the narrator's train of thought provides a logical structure for readers — even in the face of an untimely death — and effectively drives away the aesthetic of unfamiliarity.

However, the ending of "The Dead Child" is not a complete turning away from the grotesque. Now that it is years later, the teacher, pondering on the faraway past, wonders whether it is the scent of roses that has provoked a sense of repulsion and, with it, the memory of that sad event (117). This involuntary reaction, triggered by a smell, reveals that something remains hidden from the teacher's, and thus from readers', comprehension. The mysteriousness and inevitability of the laws of nature — life and death — are not entirely accepted by the narrator after all, for her body seems to revolt at "some element" she cannot control, some aspect that goes beyond reason, beyond even the acceptance that we cannot understand everything. As well, the narrator's memory, evoked by the smell of roses, represents a displacement of the actual grotesque image itself (the dead child described earlier in the narration). This displacement functions, as it does in Munro's story, to re-evolve a disturbing atmosphere. The narrator's memory of her experience in Manitoba is troubling enough to her that it transcends the decades; for readers, the real polar opposition becomes evident not in the combination of flies/death and a young child, but in the irreconcilability of the

presence of that image in relation to the passing of time (which is supposed to heal all wounds, after all), the idyllic backdrop of a mature woman's country retreat, and the smell of flowers which normally — and especially to this narrator who enjoys her garden — brings a sense of harmony. Therefore, while the arguments I have discussed point to the non-grotesque features of this chapter and the devices employed by Roy, there is a quality to "The Dead Child" that strongly points to an incomplete refusal of the grotesque.

The absence, in Munro's story, of a narrator who attempts to tie things together marks an important difference, I believe, between Munro's "Fits" and the fiction by Roy examined here. Roy's narrators are a comforting companion to readers for the most part — an obstacle to the grotesque aesthetic, really, that creates distance between a distressing fictional situation and the audience of that fiction. Ultimately, the diverse roles of the narrators point to the most significant difference between the strategies of these two writers: Roy does not use the device of hiddenness to cause confusion in her readers and prompt them to try and make sense of the nonsensical. Connections are not left concealed. The narrator in *The Cashier*, for example, shows how deformity belongs to the human condition, God's mysterious plan, and so on. Not all the answers are given, of course, but Roy tends to tell us that the lack of answers is to be expected — it belongs to the larger scheme of things, and therefore stands as a different dynamic than Munro's, where conflict's source, cause, and connections remain perpetually hidden to readers. Munro's reliance on the strategy of hiddenness results in the antithesis of suppression: the evocation of a phenomenon not explicitly voiced in words.

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

forth” something — the negation of hiddenness, in a realm wherein paradox and ambivalence thrive.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Margot Northey's *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction* was published in 1976 and thus does not, of course, consider the wealth of fiction of the grotesque that has emerged in the three decades since then, or development of the term in theory by Mary Russo, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, and others. Furthermore, Northey conflates the term grotesque with the gothic (see note 3). For examples of study of the grotesque in Canadian writing, see the dissertations by Griffiths and Greene.

<sup>2</sup> Alice Munro is a writer of the grotesque. She is **also known as a writer of Southern Ontario gothic**, a genre that often features decay, hauntings, fear and anxiety, mental illness, hypocrisies of small Protestant communities, and elements of the supernatural. Although the grotesque has been associated, or even conjoined, with the gothic and the fantastic, and although some of its characteristics overlap with these genres, the grotesque is distinct from these and recognized as an aesthetic in and of itself. It does not rely on the presence of the supernatural, for example, as does the fantastic, and has its own particular history, processes, effects, and forms of expression regarding ambivalence, incongruity, and the essence of things.

<sup>3</sup> **There is a difference between a grotesque image and the grotesque aesthetic.** In a text, if a man suddenly loses his foot, the image may become grotesque because the man has suddenly become “incomplete,” and because there is a destabilizing opposition between what was once an extension of the leg and what has become, in its place, a disturbing, gaping absence. But the grotesque aesthetic involves the overall effects of a text and a characteristic I term “hiddenness.” Thus, a novel may contain a grotesque image without being a novel of the grotesque aesthetic.

<sup>4</sup> In the 1940s, Gabrielle Roy wrote several short stories, some of which she published in small magazines. From the primitive caveman in “Dieu” (1948), whose wall drawings show his obsession with death, to the swollen cadavers polluting the waters of Roy's version of the story of Noah's Ark (“Le déluge” 1948), to domestic violence in “La lune des moissons” (1947), to overeating and the hoarding of food in “La grande voyageuse” (1942), many of Roy's early stories present a consistent concern with exaggeration, violence, and the bizarre. If anything, as far as the grotesque is concerned, these writings raise the question of whether the aesthetic can operate when there is an *over*-abundance of shocking and absurd elements.

But the main issue that underlies their exclusion from this study is that the sophistication of Roy's canonical writings has little in common with the level of writing of these early stories, and their subject matter does not lend itself easily to comparison with the subject matter of Roy's well-known work, or to fiction by Munro. What these short stories do make evident is that Roy's canonical fiction is, for the most part, much less graphically violent than many of her earlier unpublished or "semi-published" short stories (stories published in small magazines). Whether Roy suppressed a tendency toward the sombre after the 1940s is, however, a matter for another study.

<sup>5</sup> The short story "The Wheelchair," in which an Inuit man confined to a wheelchair is accidentally left out all night by a group of careless children and ends up resembling, after his horrendous experience, "some vegetable creature which had been spoiled by too much water"; the rape scene in *Windflower*; the brain damage suffered by Alicia in *Street of Riches*; and the subject of illness and death in "The Satellites," are other examples of Roy's concern for the slightly bizarre or significantly darker aspects of life. I have tried to present the fiction by Roy that I believe best illustrates the author's general refusal of the grotesque aesthetic.

<sup>6</sup> Doty's text has no pagination.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, criticism of the story identifies the aspect of "appearance and illusion, camouflage and deception" (Ventura 89) that creates tension through the presence of various contradictions. Peg's story becomes "simultaneously fraudulent and respectable," writes Héliane Ventura. In a psychoanalytical study of Munro's story, Charles Hanly describes Peg's and Robert's denial of painful realities as a "disguised disclosure" that places the role of the unconscious at the forefront in the relationship between text, author, and readers (173). See also Jarrett.

<sup>8</sup> As Harpham indicates in an epigraph to chapter seven (146), the citation originates from Leonardo da Vinci.

<sup>9</sup> Libretti points out that definitions of the grotesque (by McElroy and Thomson, for example) are typically founded upon bourgeois rather than working-class notions of normalcy (173).

<sup>10</sup> It is absurd that Rose-Anna — equipped with all her motherly instincts, desires, and skills — cannot fulfil her function as primary caregiver because of the way the system works against her. Equally absurd are the very demands of the social system placed upon her to fulfil that role. In polar opposition to this (socio-economic) absurdity is the "normalcy" of poverty in Rose-Anna's society: it is accepted, even commonplace. In the novel, Rose-Anna is only one of many women who have to move every year with their family, and who live in extreme poverty. The normalcy of Rose-Anna's predicament means that it is absurd and yet also horribly logical or rational in view of the role the Church and State play, for example, in placing unrealistic and unhealthy demands upon women. Similarly, on the opposite spectrum of excess (Rose-Anna's poverty) lies the absolute dearth of resources Rose-Anna can rely on outside of her own personal resourcefulness to meet the needs of her family. Binary oppositions in the novel between absurdity and rationality, and between excess and insufficiency, reflect the traits of the grotesque aesthetic.

<sup>11</sup> *Alexandre Chenevert* is the original French title of *The Cashier*. Only English translations are used here for citations of Roy's work.

<sup>12</sup> Alexandre stands as that part of us which escapes calculation and human reason. If there is a lesson to be learned from Alexandre, it is perhaps the following: one must exchange beauty and ideals of the body for truth, for the re-establishment of a dialogue between oneself and others. Knowing the language of one's body, the solidarity between human bodies, can help us to relocate the fragile bond of human solidarity so important to Roy (translation mine).

<sup>13</sup> In English, this phrase translates loosely as "where the fibres of his being are finally

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

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