Solipsistic Ideation

Unreliable Narration and Other Aspects of Ambiguous Gothic in Patrick McGrath's *The Grotesque*

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Pro Gradu Thesis
May 2008

Tampereen yliopisto
Englantilainen filologia
Kieli- ja käännöstieteiden laitos

SALO, AAPPO: Solipsistic Ideation: Unreliable Narration and Other Aspects of Ambiguous Gothic in Patrick McGrath's *The Grotesque*

Pro gradu –tutkielma, 79 sivua
Kevät 2008

Tässä Pro gradu –tutkielmassa tutkin monimielisen (ambiguous/equivocal) gotiikan esiintymistä Patrick McGrathin romaanissa The Grotesque (1989). Romaani kertoo halvaantuneen kartanonherran Sir Hugo Coalin viimeisistä päivistä Crookin kartanossa Berkshiren maaseudulla Englannissa 1949. Tutkimuksen pääkohteena on Sir Hugon kertomuksen epäluotettavuus narratologisesta näkökulmasta. Tutkin myös groteskin esiintymistä kertomuksessa, sekä sitä miten gotiikka kirjassa rakentuu.

Tutkielman 2. luvussa esittelen tieteellisen perinteen johon tutkimukseni ankkuroituu. Aloitan luvussa 2.1 narratologialla, sillä kertomuksen tieteenä epäluotettavat kertojat kuuluvat sen aihepiiriin. Tarkastelen kertojan käsitettä narratologisessa tutkimuksessa, ja erittelen eri tutkijoiden teorioita siitä, mikä tekee kertojasta epäluotettavan ja miten epäluotettavuuden voi tekstistä päätellä. Luku 2.2 käsittelee groteskiuden käsitteen kehitystä ja eri ilmenemismuotoja historiassa. Selvitän, mitä groteskilla yleensä kirjallisuudentutkimuksessa tarkoitetaan ja miten se rakentuu. Luvussa 2.3 käyn lyhyesti läpi gotiikan historiaa ja sen eri lajityyppejä G. Richard Thompsonin typologian mukaisesti, keskittyen monimieliseen gotiikkaan johon luen *The Grotesquen.* Epäluotettavat kertojat ovat myös monimielisen gotiikan yleinen elementti.

Tutkielman analysointiosa jakaantuu kahteen päälukuun. Niistä ensimmäisessä, 3. luvussa valotan ensin päähenkilön Sir Hugon hahmoa kertojana, sekä hänen suhdettaan kirjan pahaa edustavaan hovimestariin ja muihin hahmoihin. Kirjan hahmot jakaantuvat melko tarkasti kertojan kannalta ystävällisiin ja vihamielisiin hahmoihin, sekä hänen tekojensa ja käytöksensä uhreihin. Kertojan vihamiehikseen kokemien joukossa hovimestari nousee arkkivihollisen asemaan, ja kertojan tätä kohtaan kohdistama viha alkaa vääristää hänen kuvaansa todellisuudesta ja murentaa kerronnan uskottavuutta.

4. luvun ensimmäisessä alaluvussa kuvaan groteskin ja gotiikan suhdetta kerronnassa. Kuvaan groteskin esiintymistä ja vaikutusta romaanissa ja analysoin sitä, miten gotiikkaa kirjassa tuotetaan. Esitän, että monimielinen gotiikka rakentuu epäluotettavan kertojan ja groteskin vuorovaikutuksesta. Lisäksi McGrath käyttää taitavasti gotiikan perinteistä kuvastoa luodakseen tarinaan painostavan ja alakuloisen tunnelman. Luvussa 4.2 käsittelen päähenkilön solipsistista ja harhaista maailmankuvaa sekä ennen että jälkeen halvaantumisen, ja esitän, että suuren osan romaanissa kuvatuista tapahtumista täytyy olla ainakin osittain kertojan mielikuvituksen tuotetta: lukija ei voi täysin luottaa hänen sanaansa.

Asiasanat: monimielinen gotiikka, narratologia, epäluotettava kertoja, groteski, McGrath

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1. Introduction

The Gothic novel is often understood to be principally a feature of 18th and 19th century fiction[1], beginning with Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764) and including such classics as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847).[2] Nevertheless, features and aspects considered Gothic are quite common in contemporary fiction. Gothic topoi feature frequently both in the writings of mainstream authors such as Iris Murdoch and Angela Carter, and in popular, or "genre" fiction by, for instance, Stephen King and Anne Rice. Patrick McGrath (1950) is a British author writing in the USA, whose novels have a distinctly Gothic flavour. I would place his fiction in the mainstream, as the Gothic in his novels is more an effect rather than an aim in itself. According to David Punter, Gothic writing is not realistic writing[3], but McGrath's novels do stick to fairly realistic themes and issues. The Gothic of McGrath has more to do with the mood, and the psychology of the characters, than the plot.

1.1 McGrath and his novels

McGrath was born in England, but only started writing after he moved to New York. Before writing he has worked in several mental institutions, from where he has gained an understanding of human mental processes and their disruptions, but arguably a greater introduction to the world of psychic disturbance derives from his childhood, growing up near Broadmoor mental hospital in Crowthorne, in Berkshire, England. His

[1] Hume, 1969, p. 282
[2] Khair, 2006, p. 157
[3] Punter, 1980, p. 373

father was a medical superintendent there, and McGrath has said[4] that he remembers watching and playing with the inmates of Broadmoor, and listening to his father explain to him the various stories and pathologies of the patients, always differentiating between personal history and medical condition. McGrath has been able to use this knowledge of the workings of the human mind in his novels. Exactly what happens is rarely important in his books – they generally deal with mental breakdown, with the internal world of the main characters which, for one reason or another, becomes increasingly distant from what we might call the ‘real’ world.

The Grotesque (1989) is McGrath’s first book, and in it his penchant for Gothic settings and traditional scenery is perhaps most visible of all his novels. In his later work the overtly Gothic signs diminish, but the subject matter continues to revolve around psychological disturbances and questions of epistemological and even ontological uncertainties that are characteristic of contemporary equivocal Gothic fiction. The novels are principally concerned with characters whose interpretation of the world and events around them, and of themselves, is somehow distorted and pathological. The main character of *The Grotesque* is a paralysed man, cut off from the outside world, whose internal reality becomes increasingly unbelievable. In McGrath’s next novel *Spider* (1990), the protagonist is a certified recovering schizophrenic, who again succumbs to the disease as the book unfolds. The main character of *Dr. Haggard’s Disease* (1993) is trying to recover from a physical accident and a failed affair at the same time, and sinks deeper into delusions as his morphine addiction grows worse. The main characters are also the narrators in all these novels, and McGrath is very adept in portraying the gradual distortion of the characters’ conception of reality. In *Asylum* (1996), McGrath’s fourth book, the roles of narrator and protagonist diverge,

[4] In interviews with Michael Coffey (1990) and Thomson Gale (2006)

and we see Stella Raphael's descent into clinical depression and eventual commitment to a psychiatric hospital from the point of view of her psychiatrist. But as the roles of narrator and protagonist are separated, so too are the psychological disturbances multiplied: the reader occasionally gets a glimpse at the troubling, possessive personality of the narrating psychiatrist from between the lines. Despite the characters' objectionable and sometimes criminal deeds, McGrath is always very sympathetic towards them, and seems to treat them as victims of their own minds rather than villains.

In *The Grotesque* the Gothic surroundings are still clearly visible. It is set in 1949, in the quiet English countryside, in the house of Crook that sits in some secluded corner of Berkshire and comes complete with a nearby desolate marsh and sleepy village, both time-honoured hallmarks of Gothic tales. The story concerns events happening in the space of roughly one year in and around the manor house, and is narrated by Sir Hugo Coal, who owns the manor. He recounts his story during his last days, as he sits paralysed in a wheelchair. The book is a little difficult to summarise, because our perception of the events depend on our degree of trust in the narrating main character, Sir Hugo. The story is Sir Hugo's attempt to vindicate himself in the eyes of the reader from the events that have happened in the past year.

The protagonist, Sir Hugo Coal, is an extremely egocentric, even solipsistic character, who does not much care about other people or their lives except where they have directly to do with him. He tends to interpret the actions of others, when he notices them, as automatically involving himself, or being about himself. He sees conspiracies against him everywhere, the machinations of jealous, inferior people who try to prevent him from realising his plans. As a member of the upper class, he is apparently able to live on his family's wealth and does not have to work. He has instead

devoted his life to amateur paleontology (the term he prefers is gentleman naturalist), and has spent his life piecing together a fossilised skeleton of a dinosaur he dug up in Africa in his younger days. From the skeleton, he has drawn conclusions which go against the conventionally accepted notions of paleontology, and is having trouble getting his views heard and accepted by the larger paleontological community. Although at the time of narration he is paralysed, the story jumps back and forth to the times before his paralysis and after it.

The main story revolves around the Coals and their new servants. At the beginning of the story the Coals receive a new butler and housekeeper, and from the start Sir Hugo is obsessed with the character and actions of Fledge, the butler, whom he seeks to portray in as negative a light as possible. After Sir Hugo is paralysed, it seems that his wife Harriet and Fledge begin an affair, and the butler thus becomes the master of the house as Sir Hugo himself is reduced to observing the events, powerless to influence even his own daily life.

The plot also involves the disappearance and murder of Hugo's prospective son-in-law, Sidney Giblet. Although doubtlessly a major event in the lives of the other characters in the novel, it is treated as a peripheral facet of Sir Hugo's narrative – he is more concerned with his butler usurping his house and station. The murder is one of the big mysteries of the story, and whether the reader agrees with Sir Hugo's theories on who the murderer is greatly affects the latter's credibility as narrator.

A further obstacle for the reader in following the story in *The Grotesque* is the fact that Sir Hugo keeps jumping from narrating the past to describing his present conditions and observances. What is more, as the story gets nearer the present time, he starts to relate momentary events, anecdotes out of sequence with the main story. It is

left to the reader to piece together what happened and when. As virtually everything in the novel is told in hindsight, it is important to remember that all the characterisations of others and depictions of events are coloured by Sir Hugo's feelings at the time of narration, and they have to be seen in light of the final outcome, as he is sitting, helpless and seething, in his wheelchair.

1.2 Research questions

In this thesis I will analyse McGrath's first novel, *The Grotesque*, as a contemporary Gothic novel in the ambiguous, or equivocal, vein. My main interest in *The Grotesque* is the sense of unreliability of the narrator, Sir Hugo, as he tells his story. I will give examples of how the reader might construe that Sir Hugo is unreliable, but also of how he tries to persuade the reader of his sincerity and truthfulness. The study of narratology will be my main tool in this regard. Furthermore, I am interested in the existence and different manifestations of the grotesque in the novel, and what functions it serves in this Gothic tale.

Narratology, or the study of narratives, involves considerations on many different elements of narratives: who tells the story, to whom it is told, at what time it is told in relation to the time of the events, from what perspective are the events portrayed, and so on. As narratology is my main point of access to the novel, I will start with a discussion on its various elements. I am mainly interested in the aspects of narratological theory concerning the narrator, and especially his or her reliability. Therefore I will consider the hallmarks of the unreliable narrator, according to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's classification (1989) and Greta Olson's essay on Wayne C. Booth's

model of unreliability and her modification of it (2003). Ansgar Nünning's list of signs of unreliability[5], listed in Olson's essay, will also feature in my analysis of unreliability.

The grotesque is an age-old aesthetic mode, but one that is rather difficult to pin down or describe concisely. It has changed repeatedly throughout history. In fact, as it is experienced in reception, its existence is dependent on change: the grotesqueness has to be fresh and striking. I will endeavour to offer a description of how the concept is understood in literary criticism, the different things that have been considered grotesque throughout the ages, and what in fact constitutes the grotesque experience. I will also investigate how the grotesque is present in the book, in addition to its title, and what functions it may serve. In this part of the thesis, Wolfgang Kayser's landmark study of the grotesque (1981) will form the basis of my research.

Finally I will turn to the Gothic tradition. The Gothic genre has existed in literature for as long as the novel has, as a sort of dark twin of the more acceptably bourgeois subject matter that characterised the mainstream novel, especially at the beginning of its popularity. Always concerned with socially reprehensible or objectionable themes, Gothic has proved extremely flexible and resilient, and resides in various forms in all niches of popular culture. I will examine the different types of Gothic fiction more closely, according to G. Richard Thompson's typology (outlined in Savolainen, 1992), concentrating on the ambiguous or psychological Gothic, as that is where I place *The Grotesque*. The work of David Punter (1980) and Fred Botting (1997) on Gothic will also be informing my treatment of the genre. I will point out what elements make *The Grotesque* a novel in the Gothic tradition, and how the Gothic is constructed in the book.

[5] Nünning deals with narrator unreliability further in his monograph, *Unreliable Narration: Studien zur Theorie und Praxis unglaubwürdigen Erzählens in der englischsprachigen Erzählliteratur* (1998).

The notion of solipsism is also relevant to Sir Hugo and *The Grotesque*. However, as it is a very complex and quite controversial philosophical idea, to consider it in depth would require a very lengthy discussion. Such an undertaking is beyond the scope of this thesis, and so I will only provide a brief overview of this vast question. Solipsism is usually understood to mean extreme self-absorption or egoism. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "the view or theory that self is the only object of real knowledge or the only thing really existent." The philosophical notion of solipsism is usually considered to have started with Descartes and his methodological scepticism. Philosophical solipsism is often divided into two different subcategories, metaphysical (or ontological) solipsism and epistemological solipsism.

The first kind, metaphysical solipsism, is perhaps the best known or the one people usually think of when they hear the term solipsism. Namely, it is the belief that the self is the only thing existent, so everyone else is a figment of the one person's imagination. It is usually considered an irrational position[6] and met with universal rejection[7]. "By definition, solipsism is a philosophy without friends."[8] This is true, of course, because if one believes they are the only person in existence, any friends they may have are not really there. But it is also true because many meet solipsism with outright hostility and contempt, possibly due to the fact that the idea strikes them as absurd and yet very difficult to refute. According to David Bell, Schopenhauer declared that "solipsism can never, of course, be demonstrably refuted [...] on the other hand, it could only be found in a madhouse, and as such stands in need, not of a refutation, but of a cure."[9]

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[6] Sturgeon, 1974, p. 374
[7] Bell, 1996, p. 157
[8] Natanson, 1974, p. 241
[9] Bell, 1996, p. 158

Epistemological solipsism is a less extreme and hence less controversial idea. It holds that the only thing anyone can truly know is oneself, or the "only mind you can know is your own."[10] Conversely, one cannot know with certainty that there is more to reality than one's own experiences. Walter J. Freeman understands this position from a more biological perspective, stating that "all knowledge is created within the brains of individuals."[11] That is, everyone creates their own version or impression of the world, and no two understandings of reality are the same. Even this idea of solipsism is considered "undesirable" by some critics[12], although it is far less extreme than metaphysical solipsism.

As stated, solipsism is generally regarded as impossible to refute on a logical basis. Furthermore, it is often thought to lead to profoundly unethical behaviour: if I am the only person that really exists, why should I care about the wishes or feelings of others? Most philosophers seem to think that in "in order to make one's human life together with other people meaningful and morally responsible,"[13] one ought to reject the idea of solipsism on ethical grounds. Sami Pihlström concludes his thorough discussion on the subject by saying that "avoiding solipsism is nothing less than my most important duty as a philosopher – and as a human being."[14]

In modern Western literature the idea of solipsism features so frequently, according to Reino Virtanen, that he considers it to be a problem that is "latent in modern sensibility,"[15] a result of the modern introspection and epistemological questioning. The solipsism of Sir Hugo is not a philosophical position; rather it is a facet of his reclusive and self-centered personality, which manifests, for example, in his

[10] Kim, 2003, p. 661
[11] Freeman, 1998, p. 4
[12] Kim, 2003, p. 662
[13] Pihlström, 2004, p. 134
[14] ibid., p. 174
[15] Virtanen, 1986, p. 73

wilful isolation in his barn. As the story progresses, the isolation becomes forced as he is trapped in the grotesque ruin of his body, and his solipsistic tendencies become more prominent. In the analysis part of this thesis I will argue that solipsism becomes an ever greater force shaping his world view – how he creates his own reality through imagined scenarios and “solipsistic ideation”, as the narrator himself puts it, and starts to increasingly anchor his chains of reasoning on these illusions, events that may or may not have actually ever happened.

2. Theoretical frame

In this chapter I will outline my theoretical standpoint more fully, and define the terms and concepts I will be using in my treatment of *The Grotesque*. I argue that the questionable reliability of the narrator, on one hand, and the grotesque mode, on the other, are the elements that place *The Grotesque*[16] into the ambiguous Gothic mode. I will begin this section with a subchapter on narratology, outlining some of the terms that I employ when analysing different narratives. It is followed by a discussion on the grotesque. At the end of this section I will discuss on the history and characteristics of the Gothic genre.

2.1 Narratology

Narratology, as Mieke Bal has remarked, is "the theory of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artefacts that 'tell a story.'"[17] One focus of interest in narratology is the study of the functions and features of narrators. Studies in narratology classify narrators based on several features. On the one hand, narrators are defined by their position in the hierarchical structure of narrative levels. In Gérard Genette's terms[18], extradiegetic narrators operate at the highest level, above the diegetic level, that is, the primary story level. The primary narrative can contain other narratives, which are narrated by characters of the first narrative. These are termed intradiegetic, or second-degree narrators. The narrative levels can theoretically go on forever, the second degree being followed by the third, fourth, and so on. Genette calls the levels hypodiegetic, hypo-hypodiegetic, et cetera.

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[16] From this point onwards, I will refer to *The Grotesque* by the letter *G* and a page number whenever I illustrate my points with examples and quotations from the book.
[17] Bal, 1999, p. 3
[18] Genette, 1980, p. 228

According to Genette[19], the counterparts narrator and narratee must exist on the same diegetic level: an extradiegetic narrator is narrating to an extradiegetic narratee (the reader), and if the story has an intradiegetic narrator, they must narrate their story to an intradiegetic audience within the main story. In Genette's terms, Sir Hugo is thus an extradiegetic narrator, despite the occasional narratives within the main narrative, because they too are narrated by the same narrative voice in the same retrospective (or imagined, in the case of dreams and mind's-eye scenes) perspective as the main story. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan calls these kinds of excursions near levels of narration, by which she means "phenomena which do not constitute narrative levels in the strict sense [...] but are close to it in effect. An example is the embedding of second-degree focalization in a narrative whose narrator does not change."[20]

Narrators can also be classified based on their temporal relation to the story they are narrating. Most narrators describe events after they have happened. This is called "ulterior narration". The distance between the event and its narration varies, but generally an event can only be described after it has happened. "Anterior narration", or describing events before they happen, is a rare exception, and principally found in Biblical prophecies and other religious texts. According to Rimmon-Kenan, a third type of narration is simultaneous with the action, as a person is reporting what he is doing while he is doing it, for example[21].

The extent of the narrator's participation in the story is another basis for narratological classification. A heterodiegetic narrator plays no part in the story he tells, while a homodiegetic one is also a character of the narrative. This strongly affects the level of knowledge, and trustworthiness, of the narrator: heterodiegetic narrators can have an omniscient perspective to the events, while homodiegetic ones can only report

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[19] According to Rimmon-Kenan, 1989, p. 104
[20] Rimmon-Kenan, 1996, p. 141
[21] Rimmon-Kenan, 1989, pp. 89-90

on things they cannot witness themselves after they have learned of them from others. Thus, the narratives of homodiegetic narrators are always incomplete to a degree – if they have incomplete information about an event, they may misrepresent or misinterpret it even while striving to be accurate and truthful. F. K. Stanzel contends that even third-person narrators often have a limited and somewhat biased view of the world, and that although the unrestricted omniscient narrator can have a totally objective and valid view of the events, even they "will sooner or later have to be subject to a limitation of [their] horizon of knowledge, or [they] will be temporarily deprived of the ability to make a final evaluation of a character or event."[22] Thus the reliability of all narrators is somewhat in question. Greta Olson takes a more permissive attitude to the question of reliability, and argues that homodiegetic narrators who strive to be factual to the best of their ability, and are not impaired by the naivety of youth or biased sources of information, can still be considered reliable.[23]

According to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, the sources of a narrator's unreliability can be divided into three main factors: the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement in the story, and his problematic value scheme[24]. Limited knowledge of the world and of the events happening around the narrator might be caused by the narrator being young and not understanding the world as well as an older person would, such as the adolescent narrator of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Another reason for the narrator's limited knowledge can be that he is mentally handicapped, like the idiot-narrator of the first section of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1931). As stated above, homodiegetic narrators have, by necessity, a somewhat limited knowledge of the happenings of the story, as they are themselves in the story.

[22] Stanzel, 1986, p. 89
[23] Olson, 2003, p. 101
[24] Rimmon-Kenan, 1989, p. 100–101

A narrator's personal involvement, another characteristic of a homodiegetic narrator, can result in less than accurate depiction of events. It is especially likely to result in the unreliable or inaccurate rendering of the plot if the narrator has an emotional stake in the story he is telling. In such cases the narrator may, consciously or unconsciously, colour his description of events and characters in accordance with his own attitudes towards them, and to make the reader side with him against those whom he opposes.

The third factor which might produce unreliability in Rimmon-Kenan's scheme, the problematic value-scheme, is the most difficult one to pin down, as it involves comparing the values of the narrator with those of the implied author. The implied author, a term coined by Wayne C. Booth,[25] is a difficult concept to get at: it has been defined as "the totality of meanings that can be inferred from a text,"[26] or the "governing consciousness of the work as a whole, the source of the norms embodied in the work."[27] Thus, it is the normative stance the actual author has wanted to take in the novel (or other work), which might, and often does, differ from the actual norms of the actual author. The implied author "sees more deeply and judges more profoundly than his presented characters."[28] He thus operates between the lines, judging the characters' actions through the words and expressions chosen to describe them. The sense of unreliability stems from the reader recognising a discrepancy between what the narrator says and what can be derived from the story as a whole, that is, what the implied author says. If the two voices concur, the narrator should be deemed reliable, regardless of how insane or unacceptable he or she seems. In the words of Rimmon-Kenan, "if the

[25] Booth, 1991, p. 74
[26] Bal, 1999, p. 18
[27] Rimmon-Kenan, 1989, p. 86
[28] Booth, 1991, p. 73

implied author does share the narrator's values then the latter is reliable in this respect, no matter how objectionable his views may seem to some readers."[29]

If the implied author seems to suggest to the reader that the narrator is somehow mistaken, or acts reprehensibly, the narrator is portrayed in a negative light. According to Booth's theory this generates a situation of irony: the implied author, through textual symbols, communicates to the reader an unspoken message to which the narrator is oblivious. In other words, the reader and the implied author share the joke, the butt of which is the narrator. Once the reader has realised that the implied author is letting on that there is more to the story than the author conveys, he will start to doubt what the narrator says and construct a version of the events that is less contradictory, that seems to be more in line with everything that the reader knows.

The notion of irony is one of the chief sources of delight in reading many novels. Irony is always in part a device for excluding, as well as including: as readers who manage to spot the irony we delight in a sense of superiority, of being "in the know", that the narrator and perhaps some less-informed readers do not share.[30] This sense of irony requires, however, that the reader infer or hypothesize the stance, and the whole character, of the implied author from the whole of the text, which, as Rimmon-Kenan asserts, is often notoriously difficult.

As an example of this kind of unreliable narration, Rimmon-Kenan presents a passage from Ambrose Bierce's "Oil of Dog". In it, the narrator describes his mother, who disposes of unwanted babies for a living, as an honest woman, and the narrator himself has no qualms about dumping the bones of such a baby in a cauldron where his father usually boils the bones of dogs to make dog-oil, which is apparently some kind of panacea. "My father will never know the bones from those of a puppy,

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[29] Rimmon-Kenan, 1989, p. 101
[30] Booth, 1991, p. 304

and the few deaths which may result [...] are not important in a population which increases so rapidly." In the end of the story, when his mother and father have killed each other and both fallen into the cauldron where the dog-oil is made, the only regret the narrator confesses is that his actions have brought about "so dismal a commercial disaster."[31] The moral ambiguity and understating manner of the narration create, in Rimmon-Kenan's view, a sense of unreliability in the narrator's evaluations, even if his reporting of facts is truthful.

Greta Olson works chiefly with the same kinds of markers that expose unreliable narrators as Rimmon-Kenan does, but organises them in slightly different categories. She follows Booth in dividing unreliable narrators into fallible and untrustworthy. Fallible narrators tell the incomplete truth because of their young age or because they trust prejudiced informants, for example, not because they purposefully wish to mislead the reader. If they were to tell the same story when older, of with more accurate information, they could be expected to render a truthful account of what happened. Their unreliability is "situationally motivated", or caused by external circumstances instead of inherent characteristics.[32] Olson uses Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* as an example of a young, fallible narrator.

Untrustworthy narrators, by contrast, are unreliable because of mental illness, self-interest or other similar reasons. If they are mad, their perception of reality may be skewed or their interpretations of the actions of others incorrect. These kinds of narrators cannot report on the events around them with a great deal of truthfulness, but they are usually so conspicuous that the reader has little difficulty in recognising their version of the events as dubious. If the narrator's untrustworthiness is motivated by self-interest, the task of recognising them as untrustworthy becomes more difficult. As

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[31] Bierce, 1960, pp. 800-804
[32] Olson, 2003, p. 102

the narrator has a vested interest in convincing the reader that what he says is true, the reader has to pick up on clues from the narrative, such as discrepancies between the narrator's version of events and the reactions of other characters or contradictions in the narrator's account, that he is indeed untrustworthy.

The reader's response to unreliable narrators depends on whether they are judged simply fallible or outright untrustworthy. As fallible narrators simply leave gaps in their narration or make individual mistakes, they are more readily excused for their unreliability. In *Huckleberry Finn,* the young narrator-protagonist continuously berates himself for not behaving in the way he has been brought up to do, but instead freeing his friend Jim out of slavery, for instance. Because of his young age and questionable upbringing, he sees his behaviour as wrong, whereas the reader, and the (implied) author, see them as praiseworthy.

Untrustworthy narrators, by contrast, provoke our scepticism, and we adopt a "reading strategy that questions and revises all that they say."[33] An example of this could be the narrator of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart". From the very beginning of the story, the narrator acts in a highly suspicious manner – in fact, the first thing he does is accuse the narratee of thinking he is mad. Throughout the story he strives to prove his sanity:

> Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded - with what caution - with what foresight, with what dissimulation, I went to work![34]

Because of the narrator's uncalled-for insistence on being sane, the reader will quickly come to doubt his sanity and conclude that he is not trustworthy, and will treat all that he says with scepticism. In Olson's words, "the narrator will be diagnosed

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[33] ibid. p. 104
[34] http://www.literature.org/authors/poe-edgar-allan/tell-tale-heart.html

with pathological untrustworthiness, and the reader will choose the therapeutic strategy of reading against the grain."[35]

I find the "untrustworthy" / "fallible" –distinction that Olson espouses very useful, because it takes into account the *agency* of the narrator – all intradiegetic narrators being somewhat unreliable, it is important to make the distinction that some narrators *wilfully* mislead the reader, for their own ends. Of course, whether a narrator is aware of his unreliability might not be so easy to discern.

Ansgar Nünning has criticised the Booth model, which both Rimmon-Kenan and Olson use as basis for their models, on being too "text-immanent". This means that in the Booth model the unreliability is built-in to the text as a dynamic between the narrator and the implied author, and the reader has to pick up on the textual signals of this dynamic, or discrepancy, in order to realise the unreliability. According to Nünning, the reliability of a narrator is not an inherent quality but rather "a function of reader reception."[36] That is, the reader estimates the degree of reliability of a narrator as part of the reading of the text. In addition, the deemed reliability of the narrator depends on the reader who is doing the evaluating. All narrators start out reliable (a reader generally has no reason to doubt the narrator of a story he has just begun out of hand – even Poe's narrator is considered trustworthy at the outset, until he destroys his reliability in the first sentence). It is only after something alerts us, as readers, to question the truthfulness of the narrator's account that the question of reliability becomes relevant. Different theorists have different ideas as to what may prompt the reader to question the narrator's fidelity, and how this situation comes about. Nünning has listed several clues that the reader may pick up on to lead him to suspect the narrator's words. These clues, or textual signals, include

[35] Olson, 2003, p. 103
[36] ibid. p. 97

> (1) the narrator's explicit contradictions and other discrepancies in the narrative discourse; (2) discrepancies between the narrator's statements and actions; (3) divergences between the narrator's description of herself and other characters' descriptions of her; (4) contradictions between the narrator's explicit comments on other characters and her implicit characterization of herself or the narrator's involuntary exposure of herself; (5) contradictions between the narrator's account of events and her explanations and interpretations of the same, as well as contradictions between the story and discourse; (6) other characters' corrective verbal remarks or body signals; (7) multiperspectival arrangements of events and contrasts between various versions of the same events; (8) an accumulation of remarks relating to the self as well as linguistic signals denoting expressiveness and subjectivity; (9) an accumulation of direct addresses to the reader and conscious attempts to direct the reader's sympathy; (10) syntactic signals denoting the narrator's high level of emotional involvement, including exclamations, ellipses, repetitions, etc.; (11) explicit, self-referential, metanarrative discussions of the narrator's believability; (12) an admitted lack of reliability, memory gaps, and comments of cognitive limitations; (13) a confessed or situation-related prejudice; (14) paratextual signals such as titles, subtitles, and prefaces.[37]

Although not every point is relevant to *The Grotesque*, a large number of them are: personal, emotional involvement; confessed poor memory; contradictions between other characters' actions and Sir Hugo's interpretations of them; explicit assurances on the narrator's objectivity and believability, among others. In the analysis part of this thesis I will bring up various scenes and points in the book that correspond to Nünning's list of signals, to illustrate Sir Hugo's unreliable narration.

Wolfgang Iser stresses the co-operation of author and reader that produces a literary work. A text is composed of information the author tells outright, or "given elements", and omissions or gaps in the story. Readers, in the act of reading, "concretize" the text by filling the gaps in their own way, and so construct meaning in the text.[38] The gaps are filled differently by different readers, and even by the same reader during subsequent readings, which makes each reading of the text a different

[37] As listed by Olson, 2003, pp. 97-98
[38] Heidenreich, 1993, p. 373

experience.[39] Complimenting Booth's implied author, Iser talks about the implied reader which is a similar theoretical construct: an idealised receiver of the text who understands and shares the linguistic code that the (implied) author uses.

The reader constantly anticipates future events and re-interprets past ones as new information comes to light.[40] When dealing with an unreliable narrator, this activity in given exceptional weight: when the narrator is deemed untrustworthy, the reader has to re-evaluate everything that has come before in order to construct a believable view of the whole narrative. The reader must take especial care to recognise the omissions in the narrative, and construct their own version of the events. As the narrator may be trying to consciously obscure the actual state of things, the gaps may speak louder than the words.

The unreliable, homodiegetic narrator is a common feature in ambiguous Gothic texts. Next I will look at another characteristic feature of Gothic, the grotesque aesthetic mode.

2.2 The Grotesque

What we mean when we refer to something as grotesque has gone through many changes throughout the ages. In fact the original sense of the word grotesque harks back at least into the Classical period when Roman aesthetic critics deplored the use, by some artists, of motifs which mixed human and animal figures, architectural forms and

[39] Iser, 1988, p. 217
[40] ibid., p. 215

plant life in wholly unnatural and unreal ways, which insulted the Classical sensibilities of the time.[41]

These kinds of ornamental pictures were discovered in a cave (or grotto, which is where the term originates) in Italy during the Renaissance, when there was much general appreciation and interest in the Classical period.[42] The ornamental style renewed popularity, but it received no more appreciation from the critics of the 16th century than those of antiquity. However, in the centuries since, the grotesque gained new forms and mediums in which it appeared, and what we think of as grotesque today bears little resemblance to the original sense. Indeed, to focus on the etymology of the word is to lose sight on the varied and shifting conceptual meaning it denotes.

Geoffrey Harpham considers the grotesque "the slipperiest of aesthetic categories", and argues that it can be approached only through broad generalisations or specific instances.[43] He agrees with Wolfgang Kayser, however, that there are certain elements which appear in conjunction with the grotesque more than others: certain animals, like toads, snakes and bats; jungle vegetation; the machine brought to life; masks. This being said, the grotesque is far more than its outward manifestations, and the critics agree that these kinds of props and signs of the grotesque do not carry the definition very far. In his attempt to define the nature of the aesthetic category of the grotesque, Kayser comes to the conclusion that the grotesque is "a comprehensive structural principle in works of art"[44], that concerns the creative process, the work of art itself, and its reception.

The most important and easily measurable aspect of the grotesque is its reception, the effect it has on the experiencer. It is the feeling of estrangement, the

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[41] Kayser, 1981, p. 20
[42] Harpham, 1976, p. 461
[43] ibid.
[44] Kayser, 1981, p. 180

sudden subversion of the familiar with the uncanny or alien. The grotesque elicits a simultaneous sense of horror and laughter, an unresolved conflict between being amused and disgusted.[45] Thus, the grotesque depends very much on the individual experiencing it. Not all people find the same thing funny, or horrific. The reception of a work varies in time, as well, as the same thing cannot horrify people forever. What may have previously been thought to be supremely horrific, like the gargoyle statues of Gothic cathedrals, is today just a fanciful decorative detail. On the other hand, Harpham remarks that the term grotesque is associated with the works of Dickens in some later 20th century criticism, while his contemporaries did not think so.[46] James Schevill argues that the grotesque embodies a link between beauty and ugliness; that under a certain light, and if viewed with compassion, the ugly and deformed can appear beautiful.[47] The grotesque experience is not fixed, but shifty and fluid.

In Kayser's definition "The grotesque is the estranged world."[48] It has to do with the structure of the world: grotesque does not apply to a fantasy world of fairytales; rather, our own world must suddenly change from normal and familiar to strange and ominous. The grotesque hinges specifically on this: the world of the grotesque tale must be recognisable as everyday reality, only it is suddenly altered in some detail, some aspect that suddenly throws the whole askew, and the categories of our worldview no longer apply. "The grotesque instils fear of life rather than fear of death,"[49] meaning that the world that we thought we knew suddenly seems transformed to a realm of madness or nightmare, where logic no longer holds. But the world must not succumb to madness completely; the grotesque exists in the irresolvability of the tension: "[w]e must be believers whose faith has been profoundly shaken but not

[45] Thompson, 1979, p. 20
[46] Harpham, 1976, p. 461
[47] Schevill, 1977, p. 235
[48] Kayser, 1981, p. 184
[49] ibid. p. 185

destroyed; otherwise we lose that fear of life and become resigned to absurdity, fantasy, or death."[50]

This is where the grotesque differs from traditional 18th century Gothic in Kayser's opinion: the Gothic deals with the fantastic, horrific, and supernatural, but it all fits into the cosmic order. That is to say, it can be comprehended and sorted into categories of real and unreal, natural and supernatural; ultimately into Good and Evil. In the realm of the grotesque, everything is real, earthly; yet the nameless "It" which has transformed our world remains inexplicable, incomprehensible. The grotesque also differs from the tragic, in that while the tragic often concerns itself with individual deeds and the destruction of the moral order, the grotesque does not. The grotesque is more an expression of our failure to orient ourselves in the estranged physical universe. The tragic also ultimately fits in with the cosmic order; there is a meaning to all that has happened. Kayser stresses that the grotesque cannot suggest a meaning; otherwise the sense of grotesqueness is destroyed.[51]

Mostly the grotesque does not form the basic structure of a story, however. In Kayser's second definition, the grotesque is "a play with the absurd,"[52] and its impact is greatest when it is just one element of the story. Its force is lost if prolonged, but if it features only briefly at specific points of a work, it may introduce insanity and chaos into a world that, for the most part, is sane and normal. Grotesque characters are a common way to introduce some grotesqueness into a work. Characters may be grotesque in a number of ways, the most obvious of which is physical grotesqueness: ugly and deformed characters have a long tradition in literature, physical deformity depicting variously either a sinful and depraved individual, or a good soul whose kindness is enhanced by their unfortunate outward appearance. Another type of

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[50] Harpham, 1976, p. 462
[51] Kayser, 1981, pp. 185-186
[52] ibid. p. 187

grotesque character is one who is somehow fixated or obsessed, impelled by an impersonal, mechanical driving force. These kinds of characters can be amusing, if they feature in a grotesque comedy, but perhaps more commonly the single-minded obsession of these monomaniacs, fanatics and madmen will seem terrifying.[53]

Kathy Acker's short story "J" is a relentlessly grotesque tale. According to the foreword it is the story of B, who was a 19th century writer in Paris who suffered from syphilis, and his lover J, although the story is set in New York in the 20th century and the man has AIDS instead. Because the actual identities of the two characters are impossible to be deduced from the story, and very little happens in the story itself, the reader's attention is drawn exclusively on the visceral, unremittingly physical images of lust, violence, bodily fluids, and rotting flesh, which follow one another in an interminable stream, occasionally punctuated by the characters' musings on desire and pleasure. In one of the more dreamlike and graphic scenes, B recalls a dead and decaying hooker he saw once on the street:

> The inner parts' reeks eradicated the smells of the homeless' urine. Flies buzzed over the stomach while battalions of maggots in waves of viscosity so thick what was left of the flesh was resurrected emerged from the gut. All of this rose up and down like a wave and then orgasmed and transformed the hooker into a woman having a baby. We live in a world of transformation.[54]

The effect of the story's concentration on the bodily is accentuated by the claim in the foreword that it is an "essentially useless and very innocent story." While the story is impressive in the strength and intensity of the images it projects, and the mixture of revulsion and fascination they produce, on the whole it seems to reinforce the critics' claim that, if used excessively, the power of the grotesque is lost, and what is left is a series of gruesome imagery which does not create the sense of the normal

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[53] Harpham, 1976, p.465
[54] Morrow and McGrath, 1991, p. 306

world transformed. The world of "J" is comprehensively gruesome, and the contrast with the "normal" is not produced.

If the grotesque differs from the supernatural Gothic of the 18th century, contemporary Gothic relies on it quite extensively to create tension, an atmosphere of alienation and uncertainty. As it cannot be resolved and sorted into the cosmic order, the nameless "it" of the grotesque can "open chinks where we can see the hidden world"[55] beyond the "cosmic order" of canonised truth and accepted worldview. Gothic tales can use the grotesque mode to address cultural fears and examine taboo elements, and reveal to us important things about ourselves we would not necessarily like to ponder. In tales that do not concern themselves with instruction on morality or lessons where evil in the end gets its due, the grotesque pushes the boundaries of the accepted and of reality. In Harpham's words, "the basic assumption of the grotesque is that the rules of order have collapsed."[56]

That said, the grotesque has sometimes been used as an aid in instructing, in making a moral point. In Flannery O'Connor's religiously motivated writing, the grotesque is used to underscore the baseness of material life when one is separated from God and the religious community. Donald E. Hardy argues that the spiritual and emotional isolation of the characters is a manifestation of the grotesque.[57] The characters are often monomaniacal fanatics like the main character of *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes, who, in the Bible-saturated American South, violently tries to reject Jesus and the Christian doctrine. He is unable to escape the religiously oriented mindset, however, and in his attempt to oppose the Christian church he starts his own Church without Christ, preaching to indifferent crowds from the hood of his car. Later on in the book he gets into a feud with a copycat preacher, of the Holy Church of Christ Without

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[55] Kayser, 1981, p. 144
[56] Harpham, 1976, p. 466
[57] Hardy, 2007, p. 141

Christ, and kills him for not being true to what he believes in: "You ain't true. […] What do you get up on top of your car and say you don't believe in what you do believe in for?"[58] In the end he blinds himself, imitating a man who he considers a true believer and who had also blinded himself. All the characters seem to be lost, because they do not have true faith and the moral direction that comes with it. Their world is a grotesquely distorted place devoid of meaning or purpose, yet they constantly seek it in their individual ways. The author has remarked that for her, Hazel's integrity lies in his inability to live comfortably without Christian belief[59], so the book should be read as a comment endorsing the Christian faith and moral conduct. The use of the grotesque as an aid in such instruction is rare, however.

For Harpham, writing in the midst of the Cold War, realistic and objective examination of the contemporary world seems to motivate and require the use of the grotesque mode; the neurotic is credited with having a sane approach to reality instead of a distorted view. In this "more and more hallucinatory" world, there is an increasing need for the grotesque:

> So long as we could admire things orderly or harmonious as ideals toward which human beings could strive […] then the grotesque could be relegated to the greasy underworld. But when we begin to doubt that man is made in the image of God, we begin to reflect differently on distortion and perversity. In such a state of doubt the grotesque may offer itself as a reflection of the higher truths.[60]

The Gothic mode has abandoned the optimistic view of humanity since at least the times of Edgar Allan Poe, and is replete with scenarios and situations where man is certainly not the image of God, but plagued with distorted views of reality and other neurotic and pathological traits. Through its use of grotesque characters and grotesque deeds, the Gothic not only creates a feeling of alienation and strangeness, but

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[58] O'Connor, 1989, p.197
[59] O'Connor, in the author's note to the second edition of *Wise Blood* (1962)
[60] Harpham, 1976, p. 467

also tells us hard truths about the more unseemly aspects of our times, and ourselves. Kayser's third definition of the grotesque is that it attempts to invoke and then subdue the demonic aspects of the world.[61] Indeed, in revealing the hidden world, the grotesque may ultimately be liberating – there is something relieving in finally sighting the darkness one has been dreading.

Disruptiveness is a feature that the grotesque shares with the Gothic mode. The grotesque aesthetic mode is often an important element in Gothic, and certainly in the ambiguous Gothic tale of *The Grotesque.* Next I will examine the Gothic genre of literature more closely, paying special attention to the contemporary, ambiguous Gothic.

2.3 The Gothic

The literary genre of Gothic, from its inception in the 18th century, has been characterised by change, by shifting sources of terror and horror, in differing locations and surroundings. As much as the locations and anxieties of Gothic fiction have changed, however, the Gothic mode has proven to be a popular and enduring factor in much fiction, in different formats, in the 18th, 19th, 20th, and now, 21st Centuries. Indeed, it has existed for as long as the novel has, as a sort of shadow, an underside to the greater category of the novel. For its durability, and its influence on various literary, artistic and cinematic genres, Gothic has been called "the only true literary tradition. Or its stain."[62]

Gothic itself is hard to define precisely because it has existed over such a long span, and in such diverse forms. David Punter gives as unifying factors of

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[61] Kayser, 1981, p. 188
[62] Botting, 1997, p. 16

"original Gothic texts" an emphasis on portraying the terrifying, archaic settings, the supernatural, highly stereotyped characters, and the use of techniques of literary suspense.[63] However, during the centuries the term has been used to refer to such an array of different texts that the above only characterizes a small portion of it. There are other categories of Gothic fiction, the texts of which share common features with each other but bear little resemblance to the "original Gothic". The term has sometimes been applied to horror fiction in general. It has attracted a wide range of different meanings, which are not relevant to all Gothic writing of all times. However, the Gothic has, as a unifying factor, always concerned itself with the current societal threats, worries and anxieties that the ruling middle class has faced. From the degenerate, evil aristocrats in crumbling castles of the 18th century, to the dark and labyrinthine cityscapes, mad scientists and criminals of the 19th century, to the diverse, diffuse internal psychological dangers of the 20th century, Gothic has always explored the dangers perceived to be threatening the societal order and power structures of the time.

The word "Gothic" itself communicates notions of barbarity, chaos, the archaic, the medieval world as opposed to the classical. Instead of classical virtues like proportion, symmetry and clarity, the Gothic is excess and exaggeration. It is ornate, convoluted and wild. The attitude towards the medieval and the archaic has changed during the years, too. At earlier times the term Gothic carried negative, uncivilised meanings. By the time it was applied to the literary genre, however, the wildness it connotes became a positive value.[64] The literary genre itself also experienced a heyday in the late 18th and early 19th centuries among the reading public, although the critics found much of the material produced of little artistic value.

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[63] Punter, 1980, p. 1
[64] Savolainen, 1992, p. 10

The Gothic has been a middle-class art form throughout its history, yet it deals with the things which threaten and undermine middle-class values. It has existed in the fringes of middle-class culture, from where it can demonstrate the potential for revolution; the social and psychological dilemmas which haunt the culture, while at the same time working through them, and to an extent defusing them. Early Gothic in particular, according to Botting, portrayed transgression to reinforce social mores. By depicting depraved and immoral acts, and then apologetically showing the consequences of such transgression, it confirmed the social limits of society.[65]

Three things, according to David Punter, exist at the heart of Gothic as central components. The first is paranoia; in Gothic tales the reader shares in the story's sense of doubt, of the uncertainty and ambiguity of reality. The existence of the supernatural is in doubt, and the certainty of the "natural" world is called into question. The second feature is the barbaric. Gothic tests and probes the boundary of the civilised, and sheds light on the relativity of ethical and behavioural codes. Thirdly, Gothic deals with taboos. Taboos are at once sacred and unclean, those things of the frontiers of the society, and of societal existence, that both attract and repulse. They are questions that would threaten to undermine the dominant ideology, and are therefore sealed off by it in order to preserve its dominance. The examples Punter gives of taboos include the relations between the sexes, and man's place in the hierarchy of natural life, but another obvious topic, and one which is frequently discussed in Gothic fiction, is sexuality that deviates from the societal norm.[66] In general, Gothic delights in existing on the fringes of the acceptable, as that is where fear resides. That is also where the grotesque is felt – figures teetering on the edge of the acceptable can elicit both laughter and revulsion, and the untenable combination of both, the unresolvable combination of

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[65] Botting, 1997, pp.7-8
[66] Punter, 1980, pp. 404-405

responses, is often the trigger for the fear and horror that the Gothic creates and relishes.

Gothic authors have always dared to speak about that which cannot, or should not be mentioned, and delighted in inverting social and moral structures, acting out the dangers that people perceived were threatening them. In its dealings with prevailing social and sexual taboos, the Gothic has always elicited strong reactions from the society at large, and various Gothic classics have been banned or otherwise vilified when they were first published. Throughout its existence, the Gothic genre has exhibited a strong subversive element, which has brought it both acclaim and infamy. This also speaks of the relevance and insightfulness that the more accomplished Gothic texts have had in their day. As the stories of the genre probe the prevailing taboos, they bring to light something of the society which perhaps cannot be addressed through more conventional, "realistic" modes of access.

In the introduction to their anthology *The New Gothic*, Bradford Morrow and Patrick McGrath contend that Edgar Allan Poe was the first writer to expand from the conventional Gothic trappings of "dark forests, dripping cellars, ruined abbeys riddled by secret passages, clanking chains, skeletons, thunderstorms, and moonlight"[67] and started to also deal with the tortured and disturbed minds of the characters, using the settings as their reflections and metaphors. According to Morrow and McGrath, contemporary writers take this direction further by taking as their starting point the "spiritual and emotional breakdown"[68] of the characters, and the original hallmarks of the Gothic, the gloomy surroundings, are more peripheral, acting merely as external markers of the genre and setting the mood.

[67] Morrow and McGrath, 1991, p. xi
[68] ibid. p. xii

David Punter takes the evolution of Gothic a little further. According to him, the term Gothic is today used more than ever, and in a very wide context. As a result, contemporary Gothic has lost its original meaning somewhat, as its multitudinous and variable manifestations no longer fit the original sense of a relatively narrowly defined literary genre. As it has lost its original meaning, it has gained new ones, however, and the term has diversified in scope. Gothic is today found in film and music videos, and styles of music and dress bear the label “Gothic”, though they may have little to do with the Gothic literary style. Film especially has kept the Gothic themes and mood alive in popular culture, to which the genre has always belonged.

G. Richard Thompson has divided the sprawling expanse of Gothic into four basic subcategories, or types. His types of Gothic include the historical Gothic, the explained Gothic, the supernatural Gothic and the ambiguous, or psychological, Gothic.[69] Historical Gothic is based on legends and superstition, and is close to the historical novel in style. In explained Gothic, the perceived supernatural phenomena and entities are revealed in the end to be just natural occurrences that the feverish mind of the protagonist imbued with a spectral life. In the supernatural Gothic those supernatural phenomena and infernal creatures are actually real, and these narratives are filled with blood, violence and passion. In the subcategory of ambiguous Gothic, the whole narrative is rendered unclear, unresolved or open to many interpretations.

This is the type of Gothic that McGrath and Morrow speak of when they attempt to define the contemporary Gothic story. In ambiguous Gothic the complex narrative structure that has always been a feature of Gothic writing is taken to extreme lengths, with multiple narrators and viewpoints, and narratives within narratives which do not necessarily ever end or resolve themselves in any way. The novels of Thomas

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[69] According to Savolainen, 1992, pp. 19-20

Pynchon are an extreme example of this: “starting stories which are never finished, suggesting causal explanations which are later undermined, implying progression where there is only endless circularity.”[70] John Edgar Wideman’s *Fever* (1991) is another example of ambitious narrative techniques: the reader is rarely sure who is speaking and to whom, none of the characters are introduced or named, and the dialogue is not separated from the general narration in any way. This, combined with the apocalyptic descriptions of a city wracked by yellow fever and the sufferings of the victims, serve to create a very oppressive atmosphere, a picture of the organisation of society unravelling and chaos descending:

> What should be separated was running together. Threatened to burst. Nothing contained the way it was supposed to be. No clear lines of demarcation. A mongrel city. Traffic where there shouldn’t be traffic. An awful void opening around him, preparing itself to hold explosions of bile, vomit, gushing bowels, ooze, sludge, seepage.[71]

On one level the story is an exploration into the fear of losing all that the preceding generations have built and bequeathed us, which the failure of separating dialogue from description and one character from another, and the grotesque descriptions of the bloated and befouled victims of the fever, accentuate in the very constitution of the text.

The homodiegetic narrator, who plays a part in the story he is narrating, is a common aspect of ambiguous Gothic stories, as is the question of the certainty or uncertainty of memory. The narrating characters are often somehow morally deficient or eccentric. Bradford Morrow’s short story, “The Road to Naděja” (1991) is a contemporary Gothic story which centers on a character whose actions are motivated by extreme selfishness and an inability, or unwillingness, to empathise with the people he claims to love. The main character, whose name we are never told, steals from those

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[70] Punter, 1980, p. 389
[71] Wideman (in *The New Gothic*), 1991, pp. 276

close to him the items they most value. In the emotional turmoil that the disappearance of the precious things brings about, he can then appear very sympathetic and thus create an even closer emotional bond between himself and those he has stolen from. Practically all his relationships have been thus improved by theft, and he never exhibits the slightest moral compunction about his method of forming relationships, other than being conscious of the need to keep it a secret from everyone else. Like many other contemporary Gothic protagonists, the main character narrates his own story, and thus we only get told what he wants us to know. Any further information as to the events or the nature of the protagonist must be inferred from any clues the narrator may let slip unintentionally. In "The Road to Nadĕja", there is the slightest hint that the main character, feeling excluded when his wife dotes on their adopted son Daniel, may have caused the son to suddenly "disappear", but all we explicitly learn about his family's fate are his vague reference to burying a casket, and "[s]he's been gone a long time now. So has Danny."[72] The rest of the story is less alarming, and the narration in the first person, and the intimate connection to the protagonist that creates, has the effect of engendering a certain amount of sympathy in the reader for the character. When we see the world through their eyes, we can begin to understand, and even to some extent sympathise, with these pathological figures.

In addition to the unreliable narrator and the grotesque aesthetic mode, *The Grotesque* contains much imagery and trappings that are traditionally Gothic. In the analysis part I will delve more deeply into this Gothic "furniture" in the novel, as well as the two overarching features which make this an ambiguous Gothic tale, the grotesqueness and the unreliability.

[72] Morrow (in *The New Gothic*), 1991, pp. 210

3. The characters of The Grotesque

This chapter deals with the application of the terms and methods outlined above to the research material, *The Grotesque* by Patrick McGrath. Using the study of narratology as the starting point, I will first concentrate on the person of the narrator, Sir Hugo Coal. The next subchapter will deal with Sir Hugo's nemesis, Fledge, who Sir Hugo both hates and finds impossible to understand. The final subchapter concerns Sir Hugo's relations to the other characters, and their evolution in the course of the novel. Throughout, the grotesque elements of the story and the conventional Gothic trappings will be commented on and the way they create an ambiguous Gothic tale will be examined.

3.1 Sir Hugo, the narrator

In this chapter I will examine the person of Sir Hugo and his role and performance as narrator. I will use the textual signs and factors that produce unreliability outlined in the previous section to show how his narration may be called into question. I will also offer some suggestions for reasons he might have for not being entirely truthful.

In *The Grotesque,* Sir Hugo narrates his own story to the reader in retrospect, in a continuous monologue punctuated at times by represented dialogue. At times he is not describing past events he has witnessed, instead he relates his thoughts and reflections on the limited knowledge of doctors, for instance, or the life cycle of the bot-fly. At other times he recounts a particularly vivid dream. As the story goes on, he more and more frequently describes "scenes from his mind's eye."

These are imaginary visions that he has constructed based on what he knows, or thinks he knows, about the nature and motivations of the other characters.

Thus he is able to picture for the reader, for example, the murder of Sidney Giblet, although he maintains he was never there himself. At first he treats these imaginary scenes with the proper scepticism of the empirical scientist he has been all his adult life, but as time goes on he becomes increasingly convinced that they are realistic representations of how things actually happened. Sir Hugo is also convinced that the reader finds his visions as plausible as he does, although what he imagines has happened frequently changes as he learns new details, or reaches new conclusions based upon his speculations.

Although the narration of *The Grotesque* jumps back and forth in time according to what Sir Hugo deems relevant to his story, the narration is always ulterior, the events have already happened. The only exception to this is the eloquent final scene, the very last paragraph where Sir Hugo describes his own death simultaneously to its happening. The whole book, it then appears, was narrated on that final afternoon just before Sir Hugo's heart gave out.

Sir Hugo seems to have a rather honest and clear picture of the way he acted when he still had the command of his body. Indeed, he takes some pride in his aloofness, his admittedly selfish and self-serving attitude to those around him, and his existence at the periphery of his family's life, from where he occasionally wanders in among them, delivers a scathingly ironic remark, and then retreats back behind a newspaper or into the barn where he keeps his dinosaur fossil. This is illustrated at the very beginning of the novel, when he recalls his first impressions of his new butler:

> After all, what truck did I have with the man? To a large extent I lived in the barn with my bones, and when in the house I needed him only to put plates of food and glasses of drink under my nose. Let him be bolshie, I thought (by no means selflessly), if he keeps Harriet happy. (*G,* 3-4)

As a homodiegetic narrator, Sir Hugo's level of knowledge and perspective into the events is necessarily constrained and incomplete, but his isolation makes his field of vision into the events and the lives of people around him very narrow indeed. Sir Hugo's monomaniacal focus on his own interests and affairs to the exclusion of almost all else means that much of his knowledge of events is second hand; he was not there himself to see them. The paralysis and the subsequent lack of control serve to make the isolation even worse, but precisely his lack of control and reliance on others drives Sir Hugo to start paying other people more attention, unfortunately at a time when his capability for that attention is physically severely limited. The fact that he tries to make up for his lack of timely observation, and later restricted access to events outside his body, with flimsily rationalised hypotheses and imaginary scenes makes it even harder for the reader to take his version of the story as authoritative. As a narrator, Sir Hugo is fallible at best.

At the start of the book, Sir Hugo gives a very pragmatic picture of his attitude to the new butler. However, based on information we receive later on in the book, he most likely was not at all as indifferent to the butler as he lets on, and so his narration, in retrospect, becomes suspicious from the start. It is his proclaimed intention to give a faithful description of what happened, what he has "suffered at the hands of a treacherous servant and a faithless wife."(*G,* 10) He proclaims that whether the reader feels sympathy for him at the end or not does not matter to him, but the way he phrases his predicament alone is a clear sign that he does intend to make the reader sympathetic to his view of how things happened, and indeed, what happened. This tallies with point 9 in Nünning's list of signs of unreliability: "an accumulation of direct addresses to the reader and conscious attempts to direct the reader's sympathy."[73] Of course, practically

[73] Olson, 2003, p. 98

the whole narrative is a direct address, and the attempt to direct the reader's sympathy is veiled in professed indifference.

We learn that Sir Hugo is actually convinced that Fledge is a homosexual, and that his affair with Harriet is only a ruse that allows him to gain the house and elevate him to the social class of gentry. This might well explain the hostility Sir Hugo feels toward the butler; however, there are subtle hints throughout the narrative that suggest Sir Hugo's interest in his butler is motivated by his own feelings – that Sir Hugo might also be drawn to Fledge in a romantic sense, and is hurt because he feels jilted by him.

Sir Hugo is quite a dedicated drinker. He apparently consumes several large glasses of Scotch a day, in addition to washing his meals down with liberal amounts of wine. Whenever he is shocked or dismayed by something, which he frequently is, he retreats to his room or his barn and has some more whisky. Although he admits to having a hangover only once, after a long night of brooding and drinking, it is perhaps reasonable to assume that his observing faculties are further hampered by the constant intoxication and its consequences, in addition to his solipsistic and isolationist nature.

As I remarked at the beginning of this thesis, Sir Hugo spends his days as a gentleman naturalist, and professes to have a very scientific, empirical approach to reality: he bases his conclusions on facts, and tries to display his trains of deduction and logical reasoning to the reader, in the hopes that the reader agree with him. As he insists on being coolly rational and basing his interpretation of events on hard facts, he tries to deny his subjectivity – he attempts to convince the reader that his view on things is as close to objective as can be got. He even seems curiously unaware of his subjective take on things, despite having a quite seriously limited viewpoint, both before and after

the accident that causes his paralysis. At various points in the narrative he remarks on his empirical outlook on life and the impartial observation that the natural scientist is capable of. As the narration progresses, he expresses some doubts about his capability to maintain such objectivity, but even in the end he seems convinced of the veracity of his conclusions. The reader is not so sure, however: an admitted lack of reliability is one of the textual signals Nünning lists[74], and indeed there is a strong sense that all is not as Sir Hugo claims.

Sir Hugo is always quick to gauge any new person that enters his life. With a natural scientist's rigor he places any new individual into their respective category, as if he was classifying new species into their correct places in the biological taxonomy. He forms an opinion of people very quickly, seemingly based on his first impressions of them, and then sticks to it. They are then categorised in his schema and he will treat them accordingly (the available options seem to be either condescension or irritated needling). An example of the speed with which Sir Hugo pins new acquaintances in their places is when he first meets with Mrs. Giblet. They have barely been in each other's company a minute, and Mrs. Giblet has only had time to ask whether Sir Hugo would like some sherry, when the judgement is rendered: "Mrs. Giblet was what is popularly known as a battle-ax, a type I distinctly dislike […] confirmed terrorists themselves, they are notoriously difficult to intimidate." (G 57) Her resistance to intimidation, and therefore to Sir Hugo's inability to control her through his menacing presence, doubtlessly influence the negative manner she is portrayed. Indeed, from this moment on, Mrs. Giblet is regarded with belittling resentment, especially after she comes to Ceck to aid the police in their search for Sidney's body.

[74] Olson, 2003, p. 98

The only exception to this rule, notably, is Fledge. Based on what Sir Hugo tells us about the butler, he cannot discover the man's inner motives and designs. "Indeterminacy clings to the man like mist," (*G,* 11) he says when first describing Fledge. At the same time, he is convinced that the butler hates him intensely. Not a flicker of distaste on the butler's face betrays his true emotions, Sir Hugo concedes; in fact he seems to be the perfect butler, but Sir Hugo can sense the antipathy nonetheless. Why is Fledge's façade so impossible to penetrate, if everyone else is so quickly classified? And where does Sir Hugo get the idea that the butler must hate him so?

The Gothic has always concerned itself with prevailing social and sexual taboos. Deviant or abnormal sexuality is an established part of the classical Gothic machinery, which has always enjoyed dealing with taboo elements, with what is considered the sordid underbelly of society. While homosexuality is becoming more and more accepted in today's society, it can be said to still carry a distinct stigma in the wider societal sphere. One is marked as *different* by homosexuality. In the late 1940s of *The Grotesque*, popular reaction to sexual minorities was harsh. "Men were once *hanged* for buggery, and not so long ago either," as Sir Hugo remarks, "Exposure meant publicity, it meant notoriety, complete loss of face and reputation." (*G,* 62) In fact, the word Sir Hugo uses about homosexuality and homosexuals, "inversion" and "inverts", harks back to the early decades to the 20th century, when such terms were widely used when talking about homosexuals. In the introduction to Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) Alison Hennegan explains the term thus:

> Not that the words "lesbian" or "homosexual" even appear in *The Well of Loneliness*. Its heroine Stephen Gordon [...] is an "invert." She's a member of the "third sex", a person who was born with a male soul and mind trapped in a female body.[75]

[75] Hall, 1982, p. ix

The idea of inversion of normal sexual roles runs parallel in the mind of Sir Hugo with the butler's ambitions to become the master of the house, which was considered a disruption of the "natural" social order in older times. But as Sir Hugo notes in several points of *The Grotesque*, the old world of rigid social structure, the world of the country-house gentleman, is drawing to a close in the 1949 of *The Grotesque*, and Sir Hugo is in many ways the last of the line.

The Grotesque offers no direct evidence of Sir Hugo's sexual orientation, but there are numerous indirect hints toward his homosexuality. One such hint is the peculiar sexually charged dream he has at one point of the novel (*G,* 41-43). In the dream, he has a sexual encounter in a shadowy hall with a figure that he recognises as Mrs. Fledge. He is surprised to feel a strong feeling of lust towards the woman (he claims that he has not felt sexual desire for years), but the details he describes of her are somewhat ambiguous; in the dream she has an uncharacteristically deep voice, and is wearing men's underpants and suspenders. As he manages to undress her, and then himself, she turns and offers her bottom to him. And finally, just before he awakens with a shout, he turns to the doorway and sees Mr. Fledge standing there.

Sir Hugo says he is quite baffled by the dream, and initially tries to explain it away by circumstances: "That it was purely and simply the effect of far too much whisky, a good deal of anger, and, quite probably, indigestion, I had no doubt, no doubt at all." (*G,* 44) The explanation strikes the reader as quite feeble, and the repeated assurance in the end serves to accentuate its uncertainty. Earlier on, as Sir Hugo describes the newly-arrived Fledges, he notes that they are both of similar build; equally tall and thin ("a pair of gaunt and leafless trees," as Sir Hugo describes their first appearance (*G,* 11)). If Sir Hugo has indeed been suppressing and denying his true sexuality for all his married life, it is perhaps reasonable to propose that the dream he

had was actually of Fledge, and the figure just had the head of Mrs. Fledge out of some deeply ingrained sense of moral propriety that he cannot shake off even in dreams.

Another clue that Sir Hugo's feelings about Fledge are not entirely what he says they are is his immediate reaction when he believes he witnesses Fledge and Sidney kissing. Despite his later comments about the depravity and social dangers of homosexuality, what he seems dismayed about at the time is who Fledge is kissing: "yes, my butler, damnit, in the arms of that spineless boy." (*G,* 48) That Sir Hugo is very possessive about his butler is also shown a little earlier, as Sir Hugo asks where Fledge is and is told he is upstairs with Sidney:

> "Upstairs with Mr. Sidney? What on earth is he doing upstairs with Mr. Sidney?" This information for some reason inflamed my irritation to the point of downright fury. What was he doing upstairs with Mr. Sidney? He was *my* butler, damnit! [original emphasis] (*G,* 40)

The narrator never comments on these outbursts of strong feeling further, however, and so they might be considered inadvertent revelations of Sir Hugo's true feelings. Officially, as it were, he confesses to feeling only hatred and contempt for Fledge, whose "corrupt energies" he blames for much of the misfortunes that befall Crook and its inhabitants.

This is a harbinger of the way Sir Hugo, in his latter days, confined to the wheelchair and consumed by his rage towards Fledge, gradually loses his empirical approach to life and starts to increasingly believe in the "corrupt energies" of the satanic Fledge that destroy all the lives around him. Nevertheless he still expects the reader to follow his reasoning and to agree with his beliefs. It is also a fine instance of the irony that runs through *The Grotesque* that, this time, it perhaps *was* Fledge who is to be blamed for the dream, though not exactly in the way Sir Hugo portrays it; rather, Fledge may have awoken his dormant sexuality. Sir Hugo, then, is a perfect example of

the second source of the narrator's unreliability in Rimmon-Kenan's scheme, the personal involvement and emotional stake that the narrator has in the events he is narrating.

A reading strategy that supposes that the narrator is not reliable will always involve some degree of detective work by the reader: if the reader concludes that the narrator cannot be trusted to present the facts of the narrative accurately, he must form in his mind a theory of what the real facts are. In order to form an opinion on whether Sir Hugo is honestly convinced that the story which he puts forward to the reader is the truth as far as he knows, or whether he is weaving an elaborate lie to cover up his own complicity, the reader must form some kind of picture about what can be true and what is just too outlandish to be taken seriously. To be able to do this, the reader must assume that the characters in the book act as people could reasonably be expected to act in a similar situation. As Robert D. Hume argues, one of the unifying characteristics of Gothic novels from the beginning of the genre has been "psychological interest"[76], that is, as characters in these stories are confronted with appalling situations, they react to them in a believable and realistic fashion.

Some kind of understanding of the implied author's attitudes is inevitable in the act of reading, and necessary: the reader wants and needs to know "where the author *wants* him to stand"[77] in relation to the text's values [original emphasis]. The reader, then, detects the problematic value-scheme of the unreliable narrator by comparing it to the assumed value-scheme of the implied author. Evidence of the disparity between the value-schemes can be gleaned from facts that contradict the narrator's views, or other characters' seemingly inappropriate reactions to the events, for instance. In addition, the sense of irony in *The Grotesque*, the feeling that the author

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[76] Hume, 1969, p. 283
[77] ibid. pp. 74-75

is making fun of the protagonist and winking to the reader behind the protagonist's back, requires that the reader has some sense of the implausibility of the events Sir Hugo describes and the incongruity of the characters' reactions to them. And the sense of irony, according to Booth,[78] is what constitutes an unreliable narrator. In *The Grotesque,* the most telling signs are the incongruous conclusions that Sir Hugo draws from the behaviour of others, and his curious inability to decipher Fledge when he believes that he can read everyone else like an open book.

3.2 The Enigma of Fledge

Fledge is arguably the other principal character in *The Grotesque*. From the first sentence, Sir Hugo's narration is as centered on Fledge as it is on his own failing physique, private thoughts, and opinions of others. He has singled Fledge out as his nemesis, and in his mind he is waging a silent psychological war against the other man and his perceived intentions to usurp Sir Hugo's position. In fact, Sir Hugo has a very good reason to keep alive the notion that Fledge hates him: he is convinced that he would have lost his grip on the world as he sits confined to the wheelchair, if it wasn't for Fledge:

> It is Fledge, ironically, who maintains me – he maintains me with his hatred. I think that, were he to cease to hate me, were he to deprive me of this last fragile ling, this last *relation* with the world, then I should be swallowed up, sink into the darkness for good. Doubtless there would be a final gasp, a last flurry of solipsistic ideation, but then I would fall silent, truly become the vegetable that the world takes me for. [original emphasis] (*G,* 80)

Fledge is a tall and lean man, impeccable in manner and very capable as a butler. Despite Sir Hugo's conviction that he is inwardly burning with resentment at his

[78] Booth, 1991, p. 304

comparatively low social status, he never shows any outward indication that he might feel great anger and contempt toward his master. At several times Sir Hugo claims to detect the butler's true feelings, but these claims are always followed by a concession that he did not actually see anything improper in the butler's behaviour, rather he just sensed the antipathy.

From the first, Sir Hugo depicts him as being shifty, elusive, and hard to define. Before we are even told what it is that Sir Hugo has against the man, he is described with very negative terms: "Indeterminacy clings to the man like a mist. He has for so long concealed his true feelings that whatever core of real self yet glows within him, it is invisible to the naked eye." (*G,* 11) Whatever it is that Sir Hugo tries to see in Fledge is not revealed, and the reader can only try to guess at it as the story unfolds. Fledge is blamed for being the cause of all the misfortune that befalls the other characters, and especially Sir Hugo. Despite not being able to classify and interpret his butler's intentions, Sir Hugo is constantly observing him very closely and speculating on his possible motives and opinions. Actually he is increasingly projecting his own emotions to the butler; whatever he is thinking of the present situation, Fledge must be thinking the same.

Fledge, and his wife Doris, are both equally tall and thin, and usually clad in their black servants' uniforms. Considerable attention is paid to this, and in several places of the narrative Fledge is described as "hovering" or "looming" over the sideboard at dinner, or by the wall of the parlour, like some half-ethereal being. In several places the narration concentrates on his red mouth and gleaming, white teeth.

This harks back to an older Gothic novel: Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). At the start of the novel, Stoker describes Count Dracula's features: He is described as tall and thin, dressed all in black, with a deathly pale face, and "his mouth […] was

fixed and rather cruel-looking, with peculiarly sharp white teeth; these protruded over the lips, whose remarkable ruddiness showed astonishing vitality in a man of his years."[79] His red mouth and white teeth are remarked upon throughout the novel, as being some of his most prominent features. There are other similarities between the figure of Dracula and the picture of Fledge that Sir Hugo paints for the reader. At the beginning of *The Grotesque*, Sir Hugo makes a special point about how Mrs. Coal welcomes the Fledges as they first arrive. She open her arms in a gesture of welcome and bids them enter, "and then [the Fledges] were over the threshold, and under my roof." (*G,* 11) Remarkably, in Stoker's novel, the vampire cannot enter a house for the first time unless it is specifically invited in. After that it is free to come and go as it will. The focus of the narrative of *The Grotesque* on the crossing of the threshold of the two black-clad servants is a clear nod toward the tall, black-clad figure of Stoker's story. Perhaps to most profound similarity between *Dracula* and Sir Hugo's depiction of his scheming servant are their apparently similar goals: Count Dracula is a foreigner from a faraway, underdeveloped region, who comes to England to woo and corrupt good English maidens. Those maidens then go on to prey upon innocent English children, and thus the tall dark stranger's contaminating influence threatens the whole of English society. Similarly, Sir Hugo sees in Fledge a sinister creature from a lower and unsophisticated social stratum, who insinuates his way into the upper class home of Sir Hugo through preying on the lady of the house, thus compromising the established social structure.

The most direct reference to Bram Stoker's monster is connected with the actual cerebral haemorrhage. Sir Hugo has postponed describing it until quite late in the novel, and by this time his narrative is becoming increasingly dependent on his own

[79] Stoker, 1994, p. 28

logical leaps, conjecture and reliance on “scenes from his mind’s eye.” The reader has become to seriously doubt whether what the narrator is reporting actually took place, whether Sir Hugo is grossly misunderstanding the gestures and actions of people around him, or whether he is in fact inventing his narration instead of reporting the actual events. The cerebral accident, as Sir Hugo describes it, occurs when Fledge, bringing the master of the house his lunch in the barn, makes a homosexual advance on him. Sir Hugo promptly jumps on his feet and pushes the butler away from him, and wounds him in the mouth in the process. Fledge then advances on Sir Hugo with a bloodstained mouth, and Sir Hugo notes how his teeth are gleaming in the light. Fledge manages to overpower him, and gives him “an unholy kiss.” Fledge yanks Sir Hugo’s head back, and thus exposes his throat – but is interrupted by a knock at the door: “Fledge quickly lifted his head from my throat and turned toward the door.” (*G,* 134) Here, Fledge is unquestionably described as a monster using the familiar vampire terminology: the blood-smeared mouth planting an unholy kiss, the glinting teeth approaching the throat; only here the unholiness refers to homosexuality, not haemophilia or vampirism. The person knocking on the door is Hugo’s darling daughter Cleo, whose Coal-like features he has admired throughout the narrative and the only person who suspects that his mind might still be “ontologically alive”[80] even though he is sitting inert in his wheelchair. She is the only one to whom he has any kind of spiritual bond after the accident. The good Coal family thus manages to avert total disaster.

The scene ends with Sir Hugo descending into unconsciousness, and although the situation is rather implausible, given that Fledge has not really displayed any hints of homosexuality before and is having an affair with Harriet, the reader is left

[80] According to Sir Hugo, and to his great dismay, a doctor referred to him as “ontologically dead” after the cerebral haemorrhage

confused as to what really to believe. Here the epistemological uncertainty characteristic of contemporary ambiguous Gothic reaches its apex: although the narrator clearly describes, in detail, what happened, the reader finds it so at odds with what has been told before that he has trouble believing it. As a consequence, not only is the credibility and trustworthiness of the narrator called completely into question, the reader has no real way of constructing any kind of complete version of the events. Exactly what happened is left open.

Sir Hugo recounts his last months to the reader, and in the process draws ever wilder conclusions about the character and ambitions of Fledge. Every time the butler's actions or supposed designs are mentioned, they grow more devious and sinister, and as Sir Hugo mulls over the Fledges' time in his employment and remembers all their meaning-laden gestures and glances, he begins to regard Fledge even as a supernatural, evil being bent on Sir Hugo's downfall.

> You see, I believe that even before he entered the front door of Crook – even before he *met* me! – Fledge had conceived the ambition to usurp me [...] "Better to reign in hell," he might have said, like Milton's Satan, "than to serve in heav'n," and it's not hard to see him as Satan, as a serpent that came slithering into Crook with nothing but evil intentions[.] [Original emphasis] (*G,* 19)

Sir Hugo is always keen to uphold his appearance as a proper English gentleman. Through quoting John Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost* (1667), he simultaneously compares Fledge to Satan and neatly shows off the fruits of his education and literary knowledge, which are characteristic of the idea and image of old-world gentry that he values.

Sir Hugo's conviction that Fledge is an ambitious, scheming man intent on climbing the social ladder is not totally unwarranted. The Fledges' marriage seems in no better condition that that of the Coals'. Although Sir Hugo hardly pays any

attention to their relationship, the reader can infer that all is not well from the few fleeting observations Sir Hugo relates. We learn that they do not sleep together: Mr. Fledge sleeps in the butler's pantry, alone. In addition to Mrs. Fledge once stating that "we've not had much to laugh about, Fledge and I" (*G,* 25), that is all we actually learn about their relationship, but it does not seem to be in very good condition. Fledge is thus disposed to start the affair with Harriet when Sir Hugo is out of the way, while Mrs. Fledge is becoming more and more infatuated with alcohol.

Upon a close reading the reader can detect signs that the love affair of Fledge and Harriet is slowly evolving in the background and sometimes we are offered glimpses of this. Concise examples are hard to come by, as the reader only gets a sense that more is afoot than Sir Hugo notices, but here we may consider the following example: When Sir Hugo complains to Harriet of his lecture being postponed, Harriet is very distracted, and instead of displaying the kind of sympathy Sir Hugo obviously expects, only comments that he "will be impossible all winter".

> I frowned. This was not what I wanted to hear, not at all. Impossible indeed! Harriet, I think, realized her gaffe, and nervously touched her hair. A sort of cough came from Fledge. A sudden gust rattled the windowpanes, and was followed by a brisk volley of rain. Harriet turned toward the window again and said, distractedly: "Oh dear, Cleo and Sidney will be quite soaked." I glanced at Fledge, and I saw it: he was covering his mouth with his hand. He was doing this, I am convinced, not to muffle a cough, but to conceal the fact that *he was laughing at me*. [original emphasis] (*G,* 22)

As another example of Sir Hugo being unaware of what is happening in the lives of other people, and of his inappropriate interpretations of their signals, Sir Hugo only sees Fledge's gesture as signifying the butler's contempt for him and his station, and reads nothing into Harriet's lack of sympathy or attention, which is somewhat uncharacteristic of her. As Sir Hugo has long since stopped displaying any

affection to his wife, he seems unable (at this stage, before the open display of Harriet's and Fledge's affair) to consider that she might seek it elsewhere.

In fact, even after his paralysis has set in and Fledge and Harriet have started to openly display their affections, Sir Hugo is unwilling to believe that Fledge's emotions for Harriet could be genuine. He still remains convinced that the butler only woos Harriet to usurp his, Sir Hugo's, social position.

> Actually I don't believe he's interested in her at all. I believe he suffers from an acute sense of inferiority, and this manifests in pathological jealousy – of me. Hence his interest in Harriet. To be honest, I think he's clinically insane, a paranoid schizophrenic, in fact. (*G,* 130-131)

Before this, Sir Hugo's narration has not revealed any signs to the reader that might lead them to conclude that Fledge is somehow insane; on the contrary, he has always seemed a most capable and proper butler. But by this stage, as Sir Hugo is confined in his wheelchair and is, by his own admission, losing his objective empiricist outlook, his evaluations of others, and of Fledge in particular, are becoming ever more audacious and unbelievable.

The following question continues to haunt the reader's attitude to Sir Hugo's narrative concerning Fledge: Why does he find the butler so inscrutable, when he is so quick to decipher every other character's secret motivations? In fact, there is one other character, whose expressions and thoughts Sir Hugo occasionally has trouble understanding: George Lecky, his long-time friend and gardener. The two men have some other features in common as well. Sir Hugo notes at one point that they have remarkably similar builds:

> I saw [Fledge] one morning, a bucket in each hand, coming down the back stairs, and it made me think of George, off to feed the pigs […] In terms of bone structure and general physical build they were quite similar. They might even have been brothers, strange thought. (*G,* 100-101)

And if Fledge is the second most prominent figure in the narrative, after Sir Hugo himself, then George Lecky is arguably the third. In many places in the narrative Sir Hugo praises George's unflinching loyalty to him that stretches all the way back to Africa. We are never told much about what happened in Africa, and why the two men formed such a close bond there. This seems to be an important time to Sir Hugo, however, and the fact that he says almost nothing about how he formed the closest friendship of his life is strange, given that he so often digresses in his narrative on other topics, often of only momentary interest. "I don't wish to bore you with my African stories," he says. Yet, immediately before this, he concedes that George is to thank for the fact that he could get the dinosaur bones out of Africa, and could thus make a contribution to the science of paleontology – for his entire life's work, in other words.(*G,* 30) As gaps in the narrative go, this is probably the biggest, both in terms of time and the impact it had on the lives of both men. It seems also one of the most closely guarded secrets in Sir Hugo's account, although it takes some considerable reading between the lines to ascribe any meaning to it. It is possible, even plausible, that their time in Africa together was very meaningful emotionally to Sir Hugo, but George's behaviour suggests that he views their relationship rather more pragmatically.

After focusing on the primary characters of the story, I will next consider Sir Hugo's attitudes and relations with others at large, in order to illustrate more fully his reclusive and isolating character. I will also briefly discuss George's relationship with Sir Hugo more closely, in connection with the other farmers of Ceck.

3.3 Sir Hugo's interpretations of others

In this section, we will look at the relationships Sir Hugo has with others and how those relationships change, and especially the frequent inconsistencies between how they are

depicted by the narrator and how they appear to the reader, on the basis of the words and actions of the others in contrast to Sir Hugo's interpretations of the same. By his own admission, Sir Hugo does not have many relationships, and those few that he has are not very pleasant; "tenuous, prickly sort of arrangements", as the narrator himself puts it (*G.* 26). For the most part, he is a solitary man, entrenched behind the fortress of his barn, and when he has to venture outside its protective walls he feels himself constantly oppressed by the sinister machinations of jealous people who seek to foil his plans.

As I mentioned above, Sir Hugo does not have many amicable relationships. The only kind of people he enjoys being around are "dour, taciturn individuals [...] men with strong, uncomplicated natures and no interest in chatter. Silent, solid men." (*G,* 26) One such man is his gardener, George Lecky, whose acquaintance he had made as a young man in Africa, where he dug up the fossil he has worked on ever since. Sir Hugo brought George back from Africa with the fossil, and gave him the pig farm on the grounds of Crook manor to run. Every now and again Sir Hugo goes down to the local pub to spend time with George and the few other dour and taciturn farmers and poachers in the area, especially at times when his long-dormant sexuality is "acting up". An afternoon in the pub with them gets the "urges" out of his system (*G,* 68). His relationship with the local men seems very strange, and is probably one of the most noticeable instances where his observations appear somewhat at odds with his interpretation of the situation. For example, he says that George Lecky is a man of very few words, and that to understand his meaning one must pay close attention to his nonverbal signals. He admits that he cannot always decipher George's gestures, but still seems always to consider them benevolent. "The drawing back of the lips from the teeth that I have just described – a most peculiar and unsightly rictus – the

meaning of that […] I had never been able to fathom. […] I took it for a greeting in this context and waved gaily at him[.]" (*G,* 28) In fact, their whole friendship, as described by Sir Hugo, seems largely to exist in the narrator's head. It is not hard to imagine that George and the other men in the village tolerate Sir Hugo's company out of necessity, because he is their social better, and, in the case of George at least, their employer. He provides them their livelihood and a roof over their heads. Sir Hugo, however, perceives their gestures (ambiguous, at best) as evidence that the feeling of friendship is mutual.

Sir Hugo's relations with other characters may perhaps be divided into three groups: his (perceived) enemies, his victims and his friends. Out of these groups, the list of people he considers his enemies is, predictably, the longest – this list could conceivably include all the people in the world, as Sir Hugo is quick to blame any momentary setback on somebody else's active resistance. And as he sits in his wheelchair in his latter days and mulls over all the events of the past months and years, fresh instances of sabotage and opposition occur to him as he convinces himself that at every turn, others were trying to hinder his progress.

Apart from Fledge, his nemesis, he mentions quite a few people who either try to deliberately make his life difficult or who, at the very least, take advantage of him and provide an unwanted distraction: Sykes-Herring, the head of the Royal Society paleontology department, frequently gets blamed for first preventing Sir Hugo from delivering his lecture (he cites scheduling difficulties for the reason it had to be postponed), then for not telling anyone about it to keep attendance low (there were four people in the audience). And although no other paleontologist is mentioned by name, Sir Hugo holds them all in contempt for being "house paleontologists" and practicing "safe science" compared to his controversial ideas. (*G,* 23, 35) Another source of

antagonism in Sir Hugo's life is Father Patrick Pin, the Catholic priest of Ceck. Harriet is devoutly Catholic, and the priest often visits Crook for dinner. Sir Hugo, himself strongly opposed to religion, believes that Father Patrick tries to turn Harriet against him because he does not accept the idea of transubstantiation[81]. I believe most people would agree that the point is trivial, but it is apparently cause enough, in the mind of Sir Hugo, to make the priest actively conspire against him. In general, all the people of the village are a nuisance in Sir Hugo's opinion, coming over, for example at Christmas time, to mill around in *his* drawing room, drinking *his* sherry. In Sir Hugo's self-absorbed estimation, people who can be of no use to him directly are just wasting his time.

Mrs. Giblet, Sidney's mother, also deserves special mention at this point. After Sidney's disappearance, Sir Hugo travels to her house to inform her of what has happened, and immediately feels intense antipathy toward her. She is, in his opinion, a "battleax" who cannot be intimidated easily, and seems in many ways quite similar to Sir Hugo himself. This, ostensibly, is why Sir Hugo does not like her, and when she later comes to Ceck herself to search for the body of her son, Sir Hugo reacts surprisingly strongly – she is a "meddling woman" who should not poke her nose where it does not belong. At one point, Sir Hugo bursts out, "if I had the slightest inkling of the trouble Sidney Giblet was going to cause, I'd never have let him within a mile of Crook in the first place." (*G,* 83) This remarkably heartless outburst is never explained or commented on, and it strikes the reader as a slightly odd reaction, if Sir Hugo is completely innocent of Sidney's disappearance: why would he mind, if Mrs. Giblet tries to find his son? What other kind of trouble has Sidney caused, that Sir Hugo is so exasperated? Further, it is a sign of the questionable ethical stance that a solipsistic

[81] The notion that the bread and wine of the Eucharist is transformed into the body and blood of Christ.

worldview like Sir Hugo's engenders: a mother's anxiety over her son's fate means nothing next to the inconvenience her visit causes Sir Hugo.

The second group, Sir Hugo's victims, include people in his inner circle who are subjected to his sarcastic comments and bouts of foul mood. Doris Fledge, in her role as a servant, is particularly vulnerable to Sir Hugo's whims. At most times he is content to bully her in the kitchen, but there is one occasion when, before Christmas dinner, he comes into the kitchen, drunk from his morning Scotches, and tries to sexually assault Doris. Without betraying any desire for the woman beforehand, and despite the fact that he knows Mr. Fledge can come in at any moment, he still tries to force his hand up Doris' skirt. The scene ends with Fledge indeed coming to the door and Sir Hugo sauntering off, trying to look dignified. The incident is difficult to put into context with the rest of the book, unless one hypothesises that the whole thing was put up for the benefit of Fledge, that Sir Hugo wanted to arouse in the man feelings of rage, and maybe jealousy? After paralysis, the tables are turned: Doris becomes Sir Hugo's closest companion – she feeds, dresses and bathes the man, and talks to him every evening as she is slowly getting drunk at the kitchen table. Sir Hugo interprets her behaviour to be that of a mother toward her child, and he accepts the doting attention gratefully; she is his only remaining link to the outer world.

Another victim is of course Harriet Coal, whose dreams of a happy marriage were squashed some 25 years before the events of the book take place. After an initial period of warm feelings, the Coals quite soon drifted apart and moved into their own rooms in different wings of Crook. The marriage has not been happy, as Sir Hugo concedes, and besides being very cold toward his wife in everyday matters, he has the habit of directing frequent verbal jabs at her, if no other victim is at hand. Under the circumstances, Harriet's affair with Fledge is not hard to understand. Cleo Coal

might be considered Sir Hugo's victim as well, although in a different sense. She has always been his favourite daughter, and has enjoyed a comparatively happy life in Crook, but after Sidney disappears and she descends into a deep depression, Sir Hugo refuses to let her see a psychiatrist. Towards the end of the novel, she is increasingly cooped up in her own head and shut off from the world, plagued by delusions – she claims that Sidney's ghost visited her in her room twice, and told her that his murderer was one of the household. Now she, too, is convinced that it was Fledge. With her mother engrossed with Fledge, Doris descending deeper into alcoholism, and Sir Hugo motionless in the wheelchair, her situation continues to deteriorate. Perhaps the biggest victim in the book is, of course, Sidney Giblet. Whether he was the victim of Sir Hugo or not can only be guessed at, however.

Sir Hugo's list of friends is short, as I mentioned: apart from the few earthy men of the village discussed above, and Cleo before Sidney's disappearance, the only one who Sir Hugo feels warmly towards is his grandson, Victor. He visits Crook once or twice, but is not seen after Sidney's disappearance. Like Cleo, he has some physical features that Sir Hugo identifies with the Coal bloodline: big, protruding front teeth and thick, unruly hair. Victor is interested in psychoanalysis at the time he visits Crook, but Sir Hugo tries to shift his interest into paleontology instead. So, Sir Hugo seems only to have the patience to deal with people who are either gruff and silent manly men, or that carry on his bloodline and genetic heritage. No-one else is of any importance to him, as he feels they do not have anything to offer him in his solipsistic world. He only sees the implications of their actions on himself. The idea that he might benefit from an exchange of ideas with others seems to him absurd, maybe even threatening.

4. Versions of the Mind's Eye

How is the Gothic mode constructed in *The Grotesque,* and how does the grotesque function in setting the mood of the story? In this section I will examine the staples of the Gothic and the grotesque modes present in the book, and how they function as part of the narrative. I will consider the solipsism and hermetism of the narrator's world, and offer some thoughts on ambiguous narration as a general concept.

I will also examine Sir Hugo's solipsistic reality more closely, and offer some interpretations of the story that would seem to go further in explaining what really happened than Sir Hugo's own furtive account does. In the second subchapter I will consider Sir Hugo's trustworthiness, or lack thereof, and the possible signs and markers that call his trustworthiness into question and upon which the reader may make his judgement on the matter.

4.1 Sir Hugo and the Gothic

The grotesque, in its various senses, runs through *The Grotesque*. At the beginning of the book, Sir Hugo considers his own appearance after the cerebral haemorrhage: "As for destiny, I have become convinced that to be a grotesque is my destiny. For a man who turns into a vegetable – isn't that a grotesque?"(*G,* 8) Here, Sir Hugo alludes to the original meaning of the grotesque, the human figure intermingled and mixed with plants, vines and flowers. Throughout the book, as Sir Hugo sits in his wheelchair beneath the stairs where he is often carted, he describes himself as a grotesque sitting in his grotto, again a reference to the original pictures discovered in a cave in Italy. Towards the end of the book he has gathered up all the evidence with

which he seeks to convince the reader that Fledge is a usurper, and a sexual invert, and in a moment of emotional self-vindication bursts out:

> "But for all my flaws I have never abandoned moral value. In contrast to the naked cynicism, the violence and the perversity of Fledge, I, a grotesque, can still glimpse the good. Fledge, diabolical man that he is, *enjoys* the spectacle of my decay in his drawing room; and just as the gargoyle on a Gothic church was a defeated demon forced to serve as a sewer, so, inversely, am I forced to serve as a gargoyle in this anti-cathedral, this hell-hall that Fledge has made of Crook. Fledge is the grotesque – not I!" [Original emphasis] (*G,* 165)

Here the notion of grotesque has broadened beyond the original sense, to denote something ugly, perverted, deformed. By this time the affair between Fledge and Harriet is in full bloom, and Fledge routinely drinks tea with his former mistress, clad like a gentleman. In Fledge, Sir Hugo sees the inversion of the traditional social order, a servant trying to act the part of a master. Furthermore, as Sir Hugo is convinced Fledge is in fact a homosexual, he embodies what Sir Hugo calls a "double inversion" – a homosexual (an "invert") inverting his true desires and acting like a heterosexual (a "normal man"). In fact, coupled with the inversion of the social structure, he could be considered a triple invert, although Sir Hugo never goes this far.

The grotesque does not only apply to *The Grotesque* so literally. As mentioned above, the grotesque according to Kayser is the estranged world, and the world has indeed become estranged for Sir Hugo, in two ways. Firstly, he is of course all but cut off from the world due to his condition: he cannot move, or speak; his sensory information of the world depends entirely on whoever is propelling his wheelchair, as he sees only what passes before his eyes, and should his wheelchair be turned to the wall, he can only listen, and imagine, what is going on around him. On one of these occasions, Sir Hugo contemplates that "the imagination always tends to the grotesque." For as he sits facing the wall, he hears behind him the sounds of Harriet and

Fledge playing chess, but in his mind he imagines them having sex based on the sounds they make. This occasions him to give a definition of the grotesque: ”This is what I mean when I speak of the grotesque – the fanciful, the bizarre, the absurdly incongruous.” (*G,* 61) This is not the only definition of the grotesque that Sir Hugo offers in the course of the narrative, and of course, not the only way the grotesque is present in the text, but it does illustrate the distance to everyday reality that Sir Hugo has after the paralysis.

Secondly, he was not all that aware of his surroundings while he still had control over his body. He spent most of his time in his barn, as I have said, or otherwise preoccupied with his own thoughts. In fact, he describes how he enjoyed cultivating a sense of sullen gloom in Crook, and having everybody keep their distance. And so, it is not until his paralysis, when his world view is drastically changed, that he and the reader start to become aware of the lives of the other characters. For Sir Hugo, self-absorbed as he is, this comes as something of a shock, and he is unable to reconcile the new information with what he already knew, or thought he knew, about the others. Thus the grotesque in the sense of structure of estrangement[82] is also incarnated in the character of Sir Hugo.

Philip Thomson argues that the grotesque is always of a physical nature, it is an expression of some primitive delight in the obscene that we still possess.[83] The grotesque body is certainly well represented in *The Grotesque,* as Sir Hugo gives several descriptions of his failing physique after the cerebral accident. He describes how his breathing degenerates into a harsh grunting whenever he gets emotionally excited, and the other residents of Crook (usually Mrs. Fledge) must run over and slap him in the back to prevent him from drowning in his own phlegm. At the start of the

[82] Harpham, 1976, p. 462
[83] Thomson, 1972, p. 56

novel he offers the reader a few glimpses of his general physical state after returning from the hospital, confined to his chair: "This, then, is the "I" who speaks: cocooned in bone, I pupate behind a blank and lizardlike stare, as my body is slowly consumed by its own metabolism."(*G,* 8)

For the grotesqueness to emerge, comic patterns and structures must also be detectable in the text.[84] Sir Hugo's wildly inappropriate behaviour coupled with his high estimation of himself and contempt for most others, at times creates an image of an upper-class buffoon who bungles his way through social situations, all the while being oblivious to his own gaffes. The humour of *The Grotesque* is very black, as is to be expected from a Gothic novel.

The lurid descriptions of Sir Hugo's lessening capacity, combined with his rather elegant description of his consciousness being trapped in the prison of what used to be his body, and the occasional glimpses his narration offers of his questionable behaviour, convey a distinctly grotesque sensation, a conflict of the horrifying and the funny that cannot easily be resolved. It is precisely this unresolvability that is at the heart of the grotesque; it is both amusing and disturbing *at the same time*. The incompatibility of the two creates a tension, an atmosphere that is elemental in the grotesqueness, and which contributes to the Gothic feel of the story.

The aesthetic category of the grotesque is intimately related to the sense of Gothic. Indeed, as Kayser remarks, many Gothic texts have "grotesque" in the title,[85] such as E.A. Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1839) and Joyce Carol Oates' *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* (1994), and this one is no exception. Naturally, grotesqueness extends deeper into *The Grotesque* than the mere title; it runs through the entire narrative in many forms. The sense of the grotesque, and the grotesque state to

[84] Thomson, 1972, p. 54
[85] Kayser, 1981, p. 141

which the protagonist has succumbed, go a long way in generating the sense of gloom, of decay and termination that are characteristic of Gothic stories. In conjunction with the unreliability of the narrator's account of what has happened, his limited capacity to observe and affect his surroundings creates the sense of epistemological uncertainty in the novel: the reader can never know for sure what is true.

The Grotesque is a contemporary Gothic story in the ambiguous Gothic tradition. The story of *The Grotesque* has many of the features associated with ambiguous Gothic: it alternates between past and present, and is narrated by the main character. Ambiguous Gothic can also call into question the very possibility of knowledge. This is one of the central themes of *The Grotesque* as well; although Sir Hugo himself is eminently certain that he can and does uncover the fundamental truth of the secret motivations of other characters, the reader is less convinced. The shifting descriptions of the other characters and events, the changing and contradictory motives that Sir Hugo sees in others, and the details surrounding the unresolved murder mystery create a doubt in the reader's mind about the powers of observation and honesty of the narrator that are characteristic of ambiguous Gothic narratives.

As David Punter remarks, the Gothic is marked by narrative difficulty.[86] As Sir Hugo narrates his story, he is constantly jumping from one event of the past year that he considers noteworthy to another, interspersed with descriptions of his present state, and introspective considerations about his failing memory, but also his rigorously scientific adherence to the facts. In the midst of this, the reader is easily confused as to the chronological order of events. We are to a large extent on the mercy of Sir Hugo's narration, and going against his interpretations, however outlandish they may seem, requires some effort.

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[86] Punter, 1980, p. 19

McGrath is also very conscious of Gothic paraphernalia, or its "furniture" as he calls it. There are a number of Gothic staples that contribute to the atmosphere of the book. Traditionally, Gothic novels have tended to center on a large family house or mansion, symbolising the family line as well as being the family home. In the form of the house, fears and anxieties about shifting sexual and domestic organisation would be materialised.[87] The rambling, expansive house was never fully mapped out; it could not be thoroughly described, and could thus harbour any number of dark secrets, hidden passageways and eerie locations. It provided the gloomy and decaying atmospheric and architectural trappings that set the mood for the Gothic tale. True to form, *The Grotesque* centers on the Crook manor, which has been the seat of the Coal family for generations. In a suitably Gothic fashion, it is a crumbling, degrading house, with its elaborate wood panelling, draughty hallways and rumbling Victorian plumbing. Also in keeping with Gothic tradition, it is far too big for the dwindling number of Coals who inhabit it, who only use a small portion of the rooms. At one point in the novel, the house is referred to explicitly as a living entity, and as a metaphor for the Coal family line.

> Black against that darkling air, no line straight, it seemed a great, skirted creature that rose by sheer force of will to thrust its wavering gables at the sky – a foundering mastodon, it seemed, a dying mammoth, down on its knees but tossing its tusks against heaven in one last doomed flourish of revolt […] my house would go down as I would go down; we were the last of the line. (*G,* 34)

There are other traditional Gothic trappings found in *The Grotesque:* the Ceck marsh near the house is where Sidney's bones are buried after he has been killed and butchered;[88] his fiancée Cleo claims his ghost appears to her at night, in progressing stages of decomposition, and tells her that he has been murdered; in fact,

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[87] Botting, 1997, p. 3

[88] Marshland has been used as a setting for example in the Sherlock Holmes story, "The Hound of the Baskervilles." Though generally not considered a Gothic tale, the foggy marsh, curse theme and the spectral hound create a definite Gothic feel to it.

the whole setting of the book, a sleepy village in the countryside of a somewhat stylised and unreal post-war England, where the old social class-structure is slowly degenerating despite the quiet disapproval of the old gentility, sets a Gothic mood of dilapidation about the narrative. The sense of isolation and unreality is shown also in the fact that despite the Second World War having ended only four years previously, it is never mentioned at all by any of the characters, and seems not to have affected their lives in any way. In fact, the only time war is touched upon at all is in the beginning, when some characters are discussing the death of Rupert Brooke – a poet who died in World War I. The world of *The Grotesque,* although explicitly set in 1949, does not seem to quite get beyond the interwar period.

A clear example of the Gothic "furniture" in the novel is the fate of Sir Hugo's daughter Cleo; her degeneration into insanity after her fiancé's death. After Sidney's disappearance she grows quite sullen and morose, and later she claims that she knew what had become of him before his body was discovered, because he had appeared to her as a ghost and told her.

Sidney's ghost, as described by Cleo, is a ghost in the Scottish tradition, like Banquo's ghost in Shakespeare's *Macbeth.* That is, the ghost displays the physical characteristics of the body at the time of death, including the damage done by the murderer. In Macbeth, Banquo receives "twenty trenched gashes on his head"[89] by Macbeth's henchmen, and consequently as his ghost appears to Macbeth in the banquet scene, it has the same wounds as Banquo did when he died, as it accusingly shakes its "gory locks" at Macbeth[90]. In *The Grotesque*, the description of the phantom is much more detailed than in Shakespeare's play: Cleo describes Sidney's ghost as having a chalk-white and translucent skin and smelling unpleasantly sweet. In addition, he has a

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[89] Shakespeare, 1998, p. 95
[90] ibid. p. 97

"great ragged angry gash" where his throat should be, indicating that his throat has been cut. (*G,* 96) Furthermore, as the ghost appears the second time, he appears to have decayed – during the first visit the ghost has told Cleo a warning, but when it comes again its vocal chords are gone and it can only whisper its warning message.

The Gothic props do not dominate the narrative, however: the ghost only appears to Cleo, who is by then beginning her spiral into depression and lunacy. When Sidney's bones are found on the marsh, it becomes clear that what has actually happened to him does not entirely coincide with the shape that had appeared to Cleo, at least not the second time. The ghost can therefore be explained as a figment of Cleo's encroaching mental illness, and that is indeed how Sir Hugo views it.

The details of Sidney's murder are another instance of how the Gothic and grotesque modes interplay and reinforce one another. After his bones are dug up from the swamp, it is determined that after death, the body was butchered and fed to pigs. It is further established, that the people of Crook manor ate those same pigs for Christmas dinner. The revelation is both chilling and a good example of the dark humour that runs through the novel. It is also a nod to the tendency of Gothic tales to concern themselves with taboos; in this case, the taboo of cannibalism. The conflicting responses of amusement and revulsion serve to generate a distinctly grotesque effect, which enhances the overall Gothic mood of the story.

There is a sullen and sad atmosphere to the book, as befits a Gothic tale. It extends beyond the crumbling, empty manor house and the damp and desolate marshland around it; it is there in all the details. Things that, in lighter circumstances or fairer weather, might appear quaintly or dignifiedly Victorian and antique now seem primitive, run-down and squalid. Various details trace the decline of the country gentleman's way of life; even the tailor who used to cater specifically for that market,

and clad Sir Hugo, his father and his grandfather before him, has gone out of business. Sir Hugo watches as the world he grew up in, and where he thought he belonged, is slowly coming to an end, the long lines of tradition and hereditary privilege ending, suddenly, in him. All this is symbolised and brought to an acute point in the character of Fledge, the one-time servant who is now the master of the house and of the mistress.

One example of how the Gothic gloom permeates everything in the novel is the Coal family motto, to which Sir Hugo draws his audience's attention more than once.

> In the carving above are displayed the arms of the Coal family (Chimaera, salient, gules on sable) and beneath them our motto: *NIL DESPERANDUM.* [original emphasis] (*G,* 110)

As family mottoes go, this is not the most uplifting. It is nothing like "The world is not enough" or "Citius, Altius, Fortius" ("Faster, Higher, Stronger") [91]; rather, *Nil desperandum* ("There is no reason to despair") seems to suggest something far more discouraged and resigned; a sentiment like "I know it's bad, but just bear with it; everything ends eventually."

4.2 Sir Hugo's solipsistic world

Now I will turn my attention to the extremely solipsistic and self-centered world that Sir Hugo exists in, both before and after the paralysis. Throughout his life and marriage, he has sought to live secluded, as detached from his wife and family as he is from the outside world in his remote country house. To this end he has carefully cultivated an air of distemper and grumpiness, which could explode in the faces of those around him at any moment. Consequently, his family and servants (except Cleo,

[91] The fictional motto of James Bond's family, and the real motto of the Olympic Games, respectfully.

who enjoys confronting him) all tiptoe around him and generally give him a wide berth, to avoid any confrontation.

Sir Hugo relates his story to the reader in retrospect, in a continuous monologue punctuated by the quoted lines of other characters. His narrative is a representative instance of what Rimmon-Kenan calls near levels of narration:[92] his grotesque descriptions of his physical state after the paralysis, his constant metanarrative discussion on the cognitive coherence of his story and his evolving hypothesis of Fledge's character happen in the extradiegetic level. The actual story, involving the recounting of past events and the description of more recent ones, belongs to the diegetic level, and the frequent scenes from his mind's eye, and the vivid dreams he recounts, are meta-diegetic. The constant switching between levels, as well as temporal position in the plot, creates a very piecemeal, fragmentary narrative, which serves to increase the reader's dependence on the narrator to make sense of the story.

Nevertheless, the narration mainly happens on the extradiegetic level, and Sir Hugo is a homodiegetic narrator. Homodiegetic narrators always have a limited view of the story, and so the reader does not assume that what the narrator says is an omniscient, infallible account of what is happening. As Greta Olson suggests, this alone is not enough for the narrator to be unreliable.[93] Sir Hugo conveys a stronger sense of unreliability, however. The persistent suspicions that everyone else is working against him, his changing rationales and motives for Sidney's disappearance and murder, his repeated assurances that he is being objective and coolly rational, and the contempt and hatred he perceives coming from his butler especially, all suggest that he is, at best, grossly misinterpreting the events and the actions of people around him. Furthermore, his interpretations of these actions change in the process of telling: often, as he is

[92] Rimmon-Kenan, 1996, p. 141
[93] Olson, 2003, p. 101

recounting a particular episode, he starts to hypothesize about other peoples' motivations in that situation, and comes up with a new theory that usually supports his contention that others are constantly trying to undermine him. While such conclusions may sometimes seem believable enough, often they instead serve to reinforce the reader's sense that Sir Hugo is not quite realistic or rational in his interpretations. A clear example of this is when he describes the disturbing, sexual dream he had. Shortly afterwards in the text, he becomes convinced that "corrupt energies" emanating from Fledge were the cause of the dream:

> It occurs to me now that perhaps right from the start Fledge was causing a sort of moral infection in those around him – without our even being aware of it! I wonder, for example, whether he was responsible for that disgusting dream. And in retrospect I rather think he was[.] (*G,* 45)

As Sir Hugo's narrative progresses, it starts to lose its empirical matter-of-fact tone and become more and more concerned and dependent on signs, portents and ever wilder conjecture regarding the true, hidden meanings of peoples' gestures and their true motives. During a moment of retrospection, Sir Hugo seems conscious of this himself, as he quite frankly and honestly evaluates the change in his world view:

> The scientific attitude to which I have for decades been faithful, with its strict notions of objectivity, etc., has come under heavy attack since the accident. Cracks have appeared, and from those cracks grin monstrous anomalies. I cannot subdue them. I have become superstitious. I am subject to "sightings." (*G,* 106)

To Kayser, the chinks that the grotesque opens allow us to see into the hidden world.[94] In *The Grotesque,* the cracks lead instead to superstitious hallucinations, as Sir Hugo is unable to consider that the view of the world he maintained before the accident was not perhaps entirely accurate. Furthermore, such moments of self-appraisal are fleeting and momentary, and on the whole he is so

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[94] Kayser, 1981, p. 144

convinced of his own interpretation of things (even though his conclusions about people and their motives constantly change) that he does not call them into question, and assumes the reader to follow his reasoning and to share his conclusions, even if they are based on his “mind’s eye”, his own imagination. When he tries to envisage the beginnings of the romance between Harriet and Fledge, he pictures a scene that he did not witness in vivid detail, and based on that image he makes far-reaching conclusions. Although what he has described is only the produce of his imagination, he assumes the reader shares the conclusions he draws from it. “This is all conjectural, you must remember, but it hardly strains credibility, given what we already know.”(*G,* 69)

What are even more problematic in terms of the trustworthiness of the narrator are descriptions (all conceived through his “mind’s eye”) that Sir Hugo gives about the murder of Sidney Giblet, and the various, changing explanations he offers. He describes the scene vividly in his mind: a man rides a bicycle, carrying another man’s body in a sack. At first Sir Hugo does not recognise the rider in his own imaginary scene, but the moonlight reveals him to be Fledge, who is carrying Sidney’s body into the marsh. This imagined scene forms the starting point to all Sir Hugo’s later theorising about why Sidney was murdered – the supposed motives behind the crime change several times as the narrative progresses, but the conviction that the culprit is Fledge never changes, and the evidence for it is revealed in this one mind’s eye scene alone. Yet his guilt is never contested in Sir Hugo’s story.

Building on the theories of Edmund Husserl, Maurice Natanson states: “the world in which we naively believe is, above all, a familiar world, given to each of us as unquestionably *ours.*”[95] [original emphasis] By this he means that whatever the objective legitimacy of one’s ideas about the world, one lives and acts as though they

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[95] Natanson, 1974, p. 240

were true. The paralysed Sir Hugo, isolated and restricted in both sensory input and social contact, creates sense in his world based on his limited and biased interpretations of others, with little access to the external reality to either validate his deductions or restrain them, to keep them within the realm of the feasible. His fears about solipsistic ideation are not unfounded. For the reader, instances of unsound reasoning and other evidence of his unreliability are mounting.

At times Sir Hugo does reflect on the accuracy and chronological consistency of his narrative. He concedes that memory can be unreliable and, as since his accident he can only sit and brood on past events, “fresh patterns of significance” emerge in the events and that might hamper the chronology of his narrative. (*G,* 62) This, again, is straight out of Nünning’s list of signs of unreliability: “explicit, self-referential, metanarrative discussions of the narrator’s believability.”[96] Nevertheless, he maintains, he strives to reproduce the events as faithfully as he can manage. The candour about his less than perfect memory is doubtlessly intended, at least in part, to reassure the reader that he is trying to remain truthful, but it serves to underline doubts about the narrative. Perhaps, due to the cerebral haemorrhage, his memory was damaged or disrupted in some way, and he truly does believe what he says is true? As the mulling over of the past events is his only occupation since the accident, and his sensory capabilities have been dramatically reduced, his memories may have been enmeshed with his imagination and dreams. This might only amount to fallibility in Olson’s view,[97] but some parts of the narrative remain so incomplete or so contrary to common expectations of peoples’ actions that it seems Sir Hugo must be deliberately omitting something, downplaying his own involvement, and blaming some things outright on Fledge without sufficiently believable proof. The sense of something

[96] Olson, 2003, p. 98
[97] ibid. pp. 101-102

missing, of gaps in the narrative, forces the reader to step in and try to construct a more complete picture, without the narrator's help and even contrary to his assertions. "The opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling the gaps left by the text itself."[98]

We may consider, for instance, the scene where George Lecky gets arrested for the murder of Sidney. He has been hiding in Sir Hugo's barn for a few days, with Sir Hugo bringing him food from the house. After Fledge spots George in the barn, Sir Hugo orders Fledge to disregard what he saw, to which the butler agrees. Nevertheless, the police soon arrive and George is arrested. Nowhere in the narrative is it apparent who called the police, and although Sir Hugo clearly expects the reader to pin the blame on Fledge, we may be somewhat sceptical. Although Sir Hugo believes he detected signs of scorn and derision in the butler's manner, it seems a little unlikely that he would act explicitly counter to his orders. Furthermore, Sir Hugo had been increasingly uncomfortable with hiding the wanted man in his barn and immediately before the arrest had encouraged him to leave, to make a move: "What was his *plan*, I asked him. What did he intend to *do?* I certainly hoped, I said, that he wouldn't draw *me* into it." [original emphases] (*G,* 121) Self-preservation and the need to maintain a respectable public image seem to override the friendship Sir Hugo has extolled throughout the book. But it might be that he has a more definite reason to fear directing the police's attention at his own actions – he might be complicit in the murder himself. Mrs. Giblet actually comes to believe that Sir Hugo is to blame for the murder, after hearing George's final confession in prison before he is executed.

The three factors of unreliability listed by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan all seem to apply to Sir Hugo in *The Grotesque*.[99] He is paralysed and in a wheelchair at

[98] Iser, 1988, p. 216
[99] Rimmon-Kenan, 1989, p. 100-101

the time of narration, and can only glimpse at the outside world as it passes before his inert eyes. Even before the accident which led to his paralysis, he, by his own admission, was hardly ever at the presence of the other characters of his narration, spending most of his time in his barn with his bones, or behind a newspaper at the head of the dinner table. He therefore cannot profess to have been there to witness a large part of the story he tells, and much of it is indeed relayed as hearsay, or vivid, imaginary scenes of his "minds eye".

As for his personal involvement, he indeed has quite a lot at stake in his story, although he claims that whether or not his story is believed is of little concern to him, as he will be dead at the end. Nevertheless, he takes great pains to make the reader accept his side of the story as the authoritative one: As he sits in his chair telling his story, helpless to intervene in events around him, his family and house are being usurped by a former servant, for whom Sir Hugo has strong feelings. Furthermore, his long-time friend and servant is being tried for a murder which Sir Hugo seems convinced was committed by that same servant. In fact, Sir Hugo himself is thought by some to have been the murderer. In addition to all this, Sir Hugo's life's work and aspirations, that he for so long had defended in the face of the jealous and hard-headed reactionaries of the scientific community, are now being destroyed by mould: the fossilised dinosaur skeleton he dug up in Africa is left unattended and slowly decomposing in his barn. The problematic value-scheme of the narrator can be deduced from facts that differ from his narration, or other characters acting in a manner that contradicts his interpretation and reporting of the events. Although the whole story is narrated by Sir Hugo himself, who thereby controls which facts the reader knows about, the actions of the other characters seem constantly to contradict Sir Hugo's evaluations of them. Being usually wholly engrossed in himself and his own concerns,

he is apparently blissfully unaware of the real motives and meanings of other peoples' actions, and if a person has aggravated Sir Hugo that person is constantly belittled in his narrative, and their every action is interpreted as being part of a larger campaign against our protagonist, or at least a deliberate insult directed at him. When his lecture on the evolution of dinosaurs is attended by only four people, instead of the multitudes he expected, he blames the low turnout on the head of the Royal Society, who he concludes must be conspiring against him, instead of considering that his views are just too extreme (even after a fellow gentleman naturalist actually suggests this). An example of the ironic humour that runs through the book is that, despite the fantastical and unbelievable scenarios Sir Hugo usually concocts when relying on his mind's eye, his conviction, based on the gentleman naturalist's inspired speculation, that dinosaurs are the fathers of the birds does seem to coincide with present paleolontological theories.[100]

This extreme self-centeredness and Sir Hugo's inability to see any fault in himself is one of the primary sources of irony in *The Grotesque*. Another is the frequent hints towards homosexuality in the narrative: whenever Sir Hugo imagines sex between Harriet and Fledge, for instance, his mind's eye lingers primarily on Fledge's body, with Harriet receiving almost incidental attention as the necessary other party in the scene. Nevertheless, Sir Hugo berates Fledge for being a homosexual in addition to his other faults. This conviction, notably, is based only on the kiss between Fledge and Sidney Giblet that Sir Hugo thinks he almost glimpsed, once – nevertheless it forms the basis for his whole theory on the murderer of Sidney, as well as his contention that Fledge is only after his social status. Combined with the changing motives Sir Hugo detects in the actions of others (however much he tries to explain them by the effects of

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[100] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origin_of_birds (I realise Wikipedia is not an absolutely reliable source for an academic paper, but since avian evolution falls outside the scope of this thesis I considered it unnecessary to spend much time hunting for a more established source.)

retrospection and memory), there is simply too much unfounded or implausible conjecture in Sir Hugo's narrative for it to be taken as completely accurate.

If we consider Wayne C. Booth's division of unreliable narrators into fallible and untrustworthy[101], I argue that Sir Hugo belongs to the category "untrustworthy". If it were only that his voluntary isolation while healthy, and forced isolation after paralysis, makes his view of the events narrow and his knowledge of the character and motivations of others slight, he might not fulfil the necessary requirements of unreliability at all: he might just strive to report things as truthfully as he can, and the discrepancies and incongruities of the story result purely from his solipsistic, isolating lifestyle, and later from his severely limited capacity for observation after the paralysis. To be considered fallible, he would have to rely on the testimonies of others to construct his theories of what happened, or have a child-like innocence and lack of experience and perspective so he would not recognise the actions of others for what they were. Instead, he interprets his own observations in ways that not only seem very improbable to a reader who expects people in the novel to act somewhat like people in real life would act, but the interpretations themselves contradict each other, and change as the story goes on. Yet he considers himself an empirical scientist, and in his own eyes he is acting in a coolly rational manner, using each gesture and word as further proof of his interpretation of the designs and personalities of others, especially Fledge, towards whom his hatred apparently knows no bounds:

> Fledge appeared with my morning tea. "Snow at last, Fledge," I said, still gazing out across the fields.
>
> "So it would appear, Sir Hugo," he said. "Will there be anything else, Sir Hugo?"

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[101] Booth, 1991, p. 158-160

> "No thank you, Fledge." He left the room. Only then did I turn from the window and approach my tea. So it would appear, Sir Hugo! That snow didn't "appear"; it existed! It was real! One could see it, touch it, taste it, probably smell it, if you had a good nose (I don't). Probably *hear* it, if you were an Eskimo! Fledge was a man who took not even the evidence of his senses on trust, and veiled his cynicism in that mannered cant he spoke. Christ, how I hated him, him and his phlegmatic evasions, his low cunning, his secret lusts! [original emphasis] (*G,* 65)

What to a casual observer seems a perfectly normal exchange is interpreted by Sir Hugo as being proof that Fledge is a low-minded, contemptible person. Normal, polite English expressions like "so it would appear" are twisted in the mind of Sir Hugo to convey distrust and cynicism. In addition, the surprising burst of vitriolic emotion the exchange arouses in Sir Hugo leads the reader to suspect that some important motive for his hateful outburst is left unsaid. How else can such a seemingly innocent conversation lead to such a strong reaction? If we consider Nünning's list of signals of unreliability[102], here we find an example of contradictions between the narrator's account of events and her explanations and interpretations of the same. Also, the exclamation marks and italics are clear syntactic signals denoting the narrator's high level of emotional involvement.

In addition, the scientific method that Sir Hugo employs in his naturalist's studies, and later to convince the reader that his version of the events is accurate, relies heavily on the use of his own imagination, "inspired guesswork", and scenes of his "mind's eye". As the story goes on, the logical leaps in his reasoning become more and more improbable, and as he relies on the imagined views from his mind's eye to support crucial tenets of his theory, his credibility in the eyes of the reader grows less and less.

Nevertheless, the consistently homodiegetic narration of the novel serves to create a seemingly very intimate relationship between Sir Hugo and the reader. His

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[102] Olson, 2003, p. 97-98

narration deliberately seeks to create a feeling of shared experience, which he uses to try and sway the reader's sympathy and opinion in his favour. The end result is that despite his horrendous treatment of his wife and others around him, and his misguided and suspect deductions, despite even the possibility that he might have murdered his son-in-law, the reader feels a certain sympathetic affinity to him in the end, which makes the final death scene rather poignant and moving.

What part of the narrative of *The Grotesque* is truthful and what is not is of course impossible to be determined with any certainty, as are the actual events of Sidney's murder, one of the main elements of the story. Rimmon-Kenan calls texts where the reliability of the narrator cannot be determined ambiguous narratives. *The Grotesque* certainly falls in this category, where readers must constantly re-examine past information and "oscillate between mutually exclusive alternatives[103]". Greta Olson states, that "all recent models of unreliability [...] stress, that narrators cannot be neatly divided into the categories of unreliable or reliable."[104] Instead they "exist along a wide spectrum from reliability to unreliability."[105] All narrators start out reliable, as Nünning says, until the reader has reason to doubt their reliability, and as the story progresses, their reliability can change. By the story's end, the narrator of *The Grotesque* seems to reside pretty far towards the unreliable end of the spectrum. It is apparent that some of Sir Hugo's convictions of the true course of events are deeply mistaken, but the truth remains as shrouded in mystery as ever.

[103] Rimmon-Kenan, 1989, p. 103
[104] Olson, 203, p. 100
[105] ibid.

5. Conclusion

Narrator unreliability is often not very easy to determine. At the beginning of any story, readers place their trust on the voice recounting the story, and it is only after the narrator seems sufficiently at odds with common sense, reader anticipation or some other signals, that readers start to form their own opinions of the story without the help of the narrator. This requires quite a lot more effort on the part of the reader, and involves the breaking of the relationship of trust that the reader and the narrator have shared, but in the interest of finding out what is really happening in the plot most readers start to read "against the grain," and look for the unspoken message beyond the literal one. After the troubling realisation that the narrator cannot be trusted, Greta Olson calls such a revising reading a "therapeutic reading strategy."[106]

In this thesis I have examined Patrick McGrath's novel, *The Grotesque,* as a contemporary Gothic novel with an unreliable narrator. I enumerated the signs in the text that Sir Hugo's narrative has gaps and inconsistencies, and came to the conclusion that he is indeed an unreliable narrator. I consider him to be more than just fallible, which is more or less inevitable given his physical incapacity. Sir Hugo seems to consciously try to both direct the readers' sympathies toward himself and blame the butler Fledge of practically every evil he can think of. He clearly is personally involved in the tale he is narrating and has a considerable emotional stake in it, and consequently the narration is biased in his favour. In the final analysis, Sir Hugo as a narrator is judged irredeemably untrustworthy.

Pihlström notes that in literature, solipsism is often used to express human isolation from others inside one's individual consciousness.[107] For most of the novel,

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[106] ibid. p. 103
[107] Pihlström, 2004, p. 12

Sir Hugo is indeed literally isolated from everyone else inside his own consciousness, and he tries to combat that isolation through his constant attempts to play detective and find out what happens around him and the motives of the others to act as they do, despite his inability to actually observe much of the outside world. As he sinks further into his own realm of memories and misinformed conjecture, his endeavours to figure out the real designs of others become more and more hopeless. Consequently, the readers must begin their own detective work to find out what parts of his narrative can be regarded as truthful and when we must disregard what he says and instead make our own conclusions as to the truth of the matter.

I have also discussed what Sir Hugo's solipsism and personal involvement mean for the overall ability of the reader to find out what really happened in the novel. Because we have only Sir Hugo's own narrative to rely on, the fundamental truth about crucial events in the story will have to remain unclear: there is no ulterior source of information to either validate or refute the narrator's claims. Such a state of epistemological doubt is characteristic of equivocal Gothic narratives, which concern themselves broadly with fears of psychological disturbance and the difficulty of ultimately finding out the truth in the contemporary world. Further, his solipsism poses a distinct ethical problem. As he is the only important being in his universe, and others are only obstacles or means to an end, he feels no compunction about shoving them aside, perhaps even killing them. No impartial assessment of his actions is offered in the text. The reader, getting only his version of the story, is easily taken along with his view of the world. Only when the reader starts to read "against the grain" and analyse his actions and attitudes in a more critical light, does the narrator's value scheme begin to appear deeply unsound and contrary to the implied author's stance, and his untrustworthiness is again reinforced.

Unreliable narration is not the only factor that makes *The Grotesque* a contemporary Gothic novel. The grotesque, apart from being the title, permeates the book as a comprehensive aesthetic mode. The more obvious instances of physical grotesquerie, most prominently the paralysed body of Sir Hugo himself, intermingle with a brooding sense that things are seriously amiss in the manor house that forms the novel’s setting. The dry sarcasm of the narrator, the ironic humour of the implied author behind the narrator’s back, and the ghastly details of murder and oppression that hang about the Coal family create a psychological sense of grotesqueness to the entire narrative.

This combines with a whole array of traditionally Gothic trappings in the book’s setting, mood and themes. The isolated old manor house next to an uncharted swamp and a slumbering little village resonate with the inner reality of the characters; the slightly unreal and dreamlike feel of McGrath’s England of the late 1940’s is expressed in the external details of the book’s landscape as well as the characters’ traditionalist and isolationist worldviews. The book’s Gothic props, and typically Gothic themes of forbidden lust, insanity and murder, complement the epistemological uncertainty created by the first-person narration to make *The Grotesque* a fine example of a contemporary, ambiguous Gothic tale. Like McGrath’s other works, it is a remarkable example of the vitality and relevance that the Gothic mode retains in the contemporary literary scene.

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