

## Negotiating Existential Concerns of Death and Meaninglessness through the Grotesque in Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost*

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### ABSTRACT

*Grotesque and existentialism in the field of literature generally raise four points. On the one hand, the grotesque has always been associated with negative connotation elements that usually include deformity, death, violence or monstrosity. In fact, the grotesque often carries pejorative connotations for it challenges traditions and deviates from what is accepted as the norm. On the other hand, existentialism, traced way back to as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, often question the meaning of life and struggle with the anxiety of death while constantly looking for ways to justify one's existence in a world that is filled with pessimism. Thus, this paper aims to find a point of convergence between existentialism and the grotesque by primarily focusing on how the male protagonist, Sir Simon in Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost* employs the grotesque as a way to deal with existential concerns as pointed out by Irvin Yalom namely death, meaninglessness, freedom and existential isolation with an emphasis on the first two concerns. Three grotesque elements, specifically, Bakhtin's carnivalesque, Thomson's exaggeration, and Kohut's narcissism will be studied alongside the two existential concerns, death and meaninglessness. By focusing on grotesque and existential elements, the paper will illustrate how the male protagonist is able to rely on the grotesque to subdue his fear and terror brought upon by the existential concerns in order to justify his sense of existence.*

*Keywords: Oscar Wilde; Existential Concerns; Carnavalesque; Grotesque Body; Extravagance*

### INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde was one of the prolific Victorian writers during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many of his critically-acclaimed works have been translated into different languages and are still widely read by readers of all ages and backgrounds in the present century. Bristow notes that, over time, Wilde has become a figure upheld for his distinctly oppositional qualities— as an Irishman who at times felt decidedly at odds with an English literary culture to which he never fully belonged, as a man martyred for his sexual intimacy with other men, and as a maverick

who refined his unrivalled wit through epigrams that turn received wisdom on its head (12) Wilde's legacy as a literary figure which can be attributed to his impressive body of works that spans across various genres including plays, poetry, short stories, and critical essays.

*The Canterville Ghost* made its first appearance in the 1887 issues of *Court and Society Review* which was a time when ghost stories were highly popular due to the influence of Gothic novels and the resurgence of interest in occurrences dealing with the paranormal. In actuality, Wilde wrote the story as a way to respond to the cultural clashes between America and Britain. Malcolm notes that *The Canterville Ghost* was a work written in response to the conflict in the Anglo-American relations. At a time when America and Britain were resisting mutual influence on each other, America, with its modern spirit regarded the British values as backward. The British, however, regarded the negative doctrines of the New World as detrimental to the tradition that made up their cultural identity. Balakrishnan (2011) notes that in *The Canterville Ghost*, Wilde creates stereotypical characters that represent both England and the United States, satirizing both the unrefined tastes of Americans and the determination of the British to preserve their traditions. Consequently, it is a story that is based largely on the idea of contrasts which contributes to the story being both terrifying and comic. In relation to this, it is deemed feasible to study the text through the grotesque lens as according to Edward and Graulund, one of the characteristics of the grotesque appears when characters actually possess traits that are both terrifying and comic because it leads to physical disharmony (89-90). Such view is supported by Harpham (1976) who says "real and apparent contradictions abound in discussions of the grotesque; it is an extremely flexible category." Although *The Canterville Ghost* was generally regarded as a reflection of Wilde's negative impression of the American life, the novella has been studied through various lenses by literary scholars with regard to the ideas of performativity, duality and supernaturalism.

This study, then, aims to examine *The Canterville Ghost* with respect to Irvin Yalom's existential concerns specifically death and meaninglessness, concerning the protagonist, Sir Simon, and his main struggle to find meaning to his existence. From the existentialists' point of view, the problem dealing with the meaning in life is a significant one that all must confront frequently in life. Despite having a strong presence of existential ideas, the novella is rarely studied in the area of existentialism. Subsequently, this paper aims to show how the grotesque plays a role in helping the main character, Sir Simon Canterville, and his ordeal pertaining to the existential concerns that he encounters, namely, death and meaninglessness. According to Yalom (1980), death is the biggest concern for all individuals as it signifies the end of all possibilities. Yalom believes that death is the primary source of anxiety, leading one to various self-inflicted limitations. Individuals who suffer from existential crisis often contemplate upon the fear of death, and as Yalom sees it, such fear needs to be repressed. Meanwhile, Yalom explains that "the human being seems to require meaning. To live without meaning, goals, values, or ideals, seems to provoke considerable distress. In severe form, it may lead to the decision to end one's life" (422). Yalom's view is heavily influenced by early existential philosophy which claims that every human strives to create meaning in life and that there are "no guidelines for living other than those the individual creates" (423). Yalom adds that when one is unable to find a coherent pattern or explanation, feelings of dysphoria and anxiety are experienced; one feels scarred, irritated, and lost.

With regard to these two existential concerns, this paper will examine how grotesque elements such as Bakhtin's grotesque body and carnivalesque narcissism, including Thomson's idea of extravagance are used by the main character, Sir Simon, to suppress the effects of his concerns for death and meaninglessness. In turn, this employment of grotesque body and carnivalesque narcissism eventually enables him to justify his reason for existence. In addition, it also aims to demonstrate that there is not a single, definite way that individuals can resort to when it comes to dealing with their existential concerns. By exploring how grotesque can play

a role in helping Sir Simon Canterville deal with his existential concerns on death and meaninglessness, this paper hopes to advance alternative insights into the sphere of the grotesque that is usually misconstrued.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF EXISTENTIALISM AND THE GROTESQUE

While philosophy combining grotesque and existentialism are hardly studied, the therapeutic effects of the grotesque should not be ignored. Often times, these two concepts are hardly studied simultaneously because grotesque is generally viewed as pejorative. The field of existentialism usually entails meanings of life, including but not limited to readings concerning what is normal and positive. For instance, it is more common to examine how our sense of existence is bolstered through love, friendship, communal relationships, and collective, national allegiance. The therapeutic effects of the grotesque for overcoming existentialism are often the least to be recognised. In the grand scheme of things, an effort to study the grotesque and existential concerns together will shed new lights to the field of knowledge relevant to these two concepts. The grotesque's origin, which can be traced back to as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, continues to fascinate artists and scholars. While most literary scholars will usually pay attention examinations of overt grotesque elements employed in texts, some have gone further to explore authors' rationale and motifs of employing the grotesque in their texts.

The whole notion of existentialism is certainly not novel as its origins can be traced back to as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Soren Kierkegaard, helps to accord privilege to existentialism in the wake of World War II, crossing boundaries of various disciplines including but not limited to art, psychology, drama, and most importantly literature. It is within these microcosms of existentialism that literary investigations lies, employing existential psychotherapy. Specifically, it came into the picture as a result of the philosophical ideas posited by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, whose ideas gave birth to the field of phenomenology. At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, psychologists have begun to pay more attention to how certain mental issues should be dealt with by helping patients get in touch with their inner selves emotionally and spiritually rather than using medication. Viktor Frankl was, to many scholars, a pioneer at establishing ideas on existentialism to the centre of discussions. In 1980, a renowned American psychiatrist specialising in existentialism, Irvin Yalom, published one of his most influential and ground-breaking books, *Existential Psychotherapy*. In this text, he presents his four ultimate concerns of life that encompasses death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. According to Yalom, these four ultimate concerns are deeply rooted in the existence of individuals suffering from existential crises. Anyone who wishes to overcome their existential crises could take control of their own lives by creating meaning and values to justify their own existence in this world.

Meanwhile, the grotesque is omnipresent in our world, whether one chooses to acknowledge its presence or completely disregards it. Although the term, grotesque, is used colloquially today to describe objects perpetuating ugliness, strangeness, scariness, or abnormality, the epistemology of the grotesque is undoubtedly more far-reaching than its literal form. Hervouet and Vega (2014), for instance, posit that the grotesque famously borrows its name from the accident of the discovery around 1480 of the remains of Nero's Domus Aurea and its elaborate ornaments. Its meaning then gradually expanded from the designation of the decorative grotesque of the Renaissance to what may appear as a vague or all-inclusive category (2). As noted by Burke (1984), the grotesque cuts across any logical boundaries even though "such application may seem at first irrelevant, incoherent, or anarchic". In relation to this, this study aims to examine the concept of grotesque from a less conventional perspective where the grotesque will be used as the main literary trope to examine the concept of

existentialism. For instance, the grotesque degrades by putting an elevated ideal or quality which is abstract to the physical level, thus making it possible to reconnect a spiritualized ideal with its roots to the tangible and material world. This shed some light on the idea that the grotesque is not always associated with the ugly and bizarre or violent, it also has the ability to transcend its literal form by reconnecting us to people, ideas or memories that we would otherwise suppress. In the following pages, an examination of how the grotesque is used to deal with the effects brought upon by two existential concerns, namely, death and meaninglessness, is presented.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of grotesque has been largely explored in many literary genres spanning from novels to plays. Schevill (1977) notes that Writers like Hawthorne, Melville and Poe, in bringing to life their grotesque characters, highlighted the “supernatural and fantastic”. Meanwhile, Endurance, Roselezam and Majeed (2014) argue that the grotesque was employed by Poe in an in-depth manner to arouse the mysterious and inexplicable events, strange/abnormal characters and degradation through death. Furthermore, Steig (1970) also illustrated that prominent literary figures like Shakespeare, Dickens and Grass had respectively introduced influential grotesque characters into the literary world.

A number of Wilde’s works, particularly in relation to his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and his fairy tales (1888) have been examined by previous scholars in response to their grotesque representations. Riquelme (2000) explains that *Dorian Gray* is a work that merges gothic traditions with aesthetic narcissism. He further elaborates that *Dorian Gray* is a character that embodies both tendencies in a poisonous, self-negating confluence signifying madness. Meanwhile, Jones (2011) in examining Wilde’s selected fairy tales, postulates that in Wilde’s fairy tales, the concept of beauty has been distorted by the portrayal of ugliness and death through the characters and thus, these fairy tales challenge the superficial moral tenets of the British bourgeoisie. Furthermore, Clausson (2003) who explores the notion of degeneration as seen in the character *Dorian Gray*, posits that *Dorian Gray* degenerates from the higher to lower state the upper and lower class through his associations with the lower class people and eventually his character is divided between the good and evil. Thus, *Dorian Gray* is likened to *Jekyll and Hyde* who embody a hybridity of personalities that are both good and monstrous. Although these studies do not deal with the notion of grotesque directly, the concepts in which these studies examined namely narcissism, distortion of beauty and hybridity are closely associated with the grotesque as they are the concepts that Clayborough claims as incongruity with the norms. The notion of the grotesque, thus, breaks the boundaries of normalcy (Corey, 1997).

## THE GROTESQUE QUEST IN SEARCH FOR MEANING

Sir Simon’s struggle with his own sense of existence can be best seen in the line “*I must rattle my chains, and groan through keyholes, and walk about at night, if that is what you mean. It is my only reason for existing*”(26). Sir Simon’s reason for existing is based solely upon something that is both futile and purposeless as his soul is trapped within the mansion for eternity. The pursuits that Sir Simon based his existence upon such as rattling his own chains, groan through keyholes and walking about at night may suggest that he is used to living a solitary existence. In addition, it also shows that he lives an existence where hopes and expectation are absent for he is doomed to lead a repetitious existence until the Otis move into

the mansion. Although, in the end, it is made known to the readers that Sir Simon pins all of his hopes on passing through the Garden of Death, such hope has been long forgotten until he meets Virginia whom he believes holds the key to opening the portals for him.

As Yalom suggests, individuals resort to different ways to creating meanings in their own lives when they are struggling to justify the reasons for their existence. In Sir Simon's case, it is palpable that his meaning-making process gravitates towards ways which are grotesque-inclined. Wilburn notes that the Ghost of Canterville is surely one of Wilde's most endearing performers, despite the fact that he was murdered when alive (39). Although Sir Simon does derive joy from many of his attempts to scare the visitors who come to the mansion and he whimsically refers to his attempts as a form of performance, his various performances are in fact meant as small attempts to give life to his existence by revitalising it. Dryden in her study, *Oscar Wilde: Gothic Ironies and Terrible Dualities*, also suggests that the ghost regards haunting as his solemn duty where he feels obliged to do the following:

*It was his solemn duty to appear in the corridor once a week, and to gibber from the large oriel window on the first and third Wednesdays in every month, and he could not see how he could honourably escape from his obligations. It is quite true that his life had been very evil, but upon the other hand, he was most conscientious in all things connected with the supernatural. (21)*

Sir Simon's nocturnal pursuits to haunt the visitors including the Otis have become not only his reason to exist but he regards it as his obligation. In order to ensure his attempts are successful, he always makes sure his plans are perfectly executed. Every attempt to haunt is deemed an opportunity for him to participate in a grand masquerade where he carefully selects the best roles to play in order to scare the visitors to the core. His sense of existence is intensified through what Bakhtin termed as carnivalesque. As observed by Bakhtin, one of the most significant features of carnivalesque is the mask. Bakhtin himself acknowledged that the mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles. Furthermore, parodies, caricatures, grimaces, eccentric postures, and comic gestures are derived, in one way or another, from the mask. In other words, it reveals the essence of the grotesque (40).

Sir Simon also takes his nocturnal haunting pursuits seriously as he sees every attempt to haunt as his performance. While his audience are kept in the dark about the preparations he makes for each attempt, many of them will eventually be shocked by his flawless performances in which he takes great pride. Sir Simon's attentiveness can be seen from the following line:

*I may use such a theatrical expression in connection with one of the greatest mysteries of the supernatural, or to employ a more scientific term, the higher natural world, and it took him fully three hours to make his preparations. At last everything was ready, and he was very pleased with his appearance. (22-23)*

Sir Simon's nocturnal hauntings can be read as a form of carnival as he never appears in his true form. Instead, he puts on different masks and costumes to play multiple grotesque characters that include the Red Rueben, Strangled Babe, Blook-sucker of Bexley Moor, and Guant Gibeau. Because he never appears in his true form to haunt the visitors but instead chooses to rely on playing different roles to do so makes evident that Sir Simon wishes to reject conformity to himself and violate natural boundaries. When studied closely, Sir Simon who supposedly symbolizes the British culture does portray traits that challenges the tradition. This can be seen from his flamboyant choice of costumes and grotesque characters during his



haunting pursuits. Hence, this can be indirectly read as his attempting to challenge the status quo that Bakhtin claimed as the natural boundaries. The idea of how carnivalesque can be employed as a vehicle to destabilise the existing rules and regulations is highlighted by Shima (2014) in which he argues that British novelist, Angela Carter, has been able to overturn the masculine empowerment and the feminine disempowerment in her novel, *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), through carnivalization. In response to this, it is noteworthy that the Otis family members see themselves as being more superior than the ghost and they are not at all frightened or threatened by the ghost's existence. Perhaps, Sir Simon's real intention is to resort to the spirit of carnivalesque to destabilise the rules and regulations set by the Otis. As Mr Otis himself once said "...if there were such a thing as a ghost in Europe, we'd have it at home in a very short time in one of our public museums, or on the road as a show" (5). The Otis's attitude towards the ghost's presence is discourteous and disrespectful. After all, the ghost has been there long before they decide to buy the mansion. All that being said, the ghost's existence is supported through his performances that greatly gravitate towards to the spirit of the carnivalesque:

*With the enthusiasm egotism of the true artist, he went over his most celebrated performances, and smiled bitterly to himself as he recalled to mind his last appearance as "Red Rueben, or the Strangled Babe," his debut as "Guant Gibeau, the Blook-sucker of Bexley Moor. (13)*

Sir Simon also carefully selects the characters to play so that he can create the best possible shock-effects to his audience. The variety of the roles he plays is simply astonishing and this can be seen from the following lines:

*While dressed for the part of Black Isaac, or the Huntsman of Hogley Woods. He resolves to make one final effort to assert his dignity and social position, and determined to visit the insolent young Etonians the next night in his celebrated character of "Reckless Rupert, or the Headless Earl. (22)*

*Accordingly, he made arrangements for appearing to Virginia's little lover in his celebrated impersonation of "The Vampire Monk, or the Bloodless Benedictine. (26)*

This is once again similar with the carnival spirit where one chooses a character that best represents the messages that he/she wishes to express and this corresponds well with what Bakhtin called as an attempt to to escape the everydayness and rigidity of life (45). Among the characters in *The Canterville Ghost*, Sir Simon is undoubtedly the one who has the strongest need to spice up his life with diversity as he is eternally trapped in the mansion. For the sake of creating meaning in his life, he resorts to his nocturnal hauntings that resemble the spirit of the carnivalesque and this gives evident to the claim that Sir Simon has been able to utilize the grotesque to deal with his existential concern of meaninglessness.

Undoubtedly, indulging in the carnival spirit is just one of Sir Simon's endeavors in helping him justify his sense of existence. When read closely, Sir Simon being a ghost means he does not actually possess a fixed physical form. He constantly relies on his ever-evolving body parts to aid him in frightening his targets. From detached hands, eye balls and head, his body exceeds all limitations of a regular person and thus granting him his abilities to transform himself into different appearances. It is also noteworthy that Sir Simon makes use of his special abilities well enough to ensure his nocturnal hauntings are always an astounding success. Hence, this can be examined alongside Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque body where he posited that the grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually being built and created; it builds and creates another body and that the grotesque body can be manifested through a form of exaggeration and

hyperbolization. As observed by Lindley, the grotesque has been studied through the Bakhtinian lens in relation to bodily materialism and that sometimes man's superiority is paradoxically achieved through a descent into bodily materialism. They can even detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life, for they hide the rest of the body, as something secondary (341). In fact, the grotesque body can also be examined through the lens of hybridity where the body is portrayed as a mixture of two being entities. In Bakhtin's words, these creatures have a distinctive grotesque character. Some of them are half human, half animal, the hippopods with hoofs instead of feet, sirens with fishtails, "sinucephalics" who bark like dogs, satyrs, and onocentaurs. This is an entire gallery of images with bodies of mixed parts. There are also giants, dwarfs, and pygmies (369). In relation to this, a special attention will be paid to examining how Sir Simon's physical form can be associated with Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque body and hybridity.

As mentioned earlier, the detachment of one's body parts to lead an independent life is closely associated with the idea of the grotesque body. The detachment of body parts can be seen through many of the ghost's nocturnal endeavours and most of the time, it even contributes to the success of his hauntings. This can be seen from the following lines;

*All of his great achievements came back to him again, from the butler who had shot himself in the pantry because he had seen a green hand tapping at the window-pane. He went over his most celebrated performances and smile bitterly to himself as he recalled to mind his last appearance as the Furore he had excitedly one lovely June evening by merely playing ninepins with his own bones upon the lawn-tennis ground(13)*

The ghost is able to conjure up extreme fear in his target audience merely by displaying his abilities to detach his body parts namely his hands to tap on the windows and bones to be played as a form of sports, from his body. Not only is he able to generate joy and satisfaction from displaying such acts, he also feels accomplished from being able to do so. Undoubtedly, such accomplishments are precisely what he needs in order to create meanings for his existence. Another form of the ghost's proud achievement can be seen from his ability to transform himself into another creature. As Wilde wrote, "*the ghost glared at her in fury, and began at once make preparations for turning himself into a large black dog, and accomplishment for which he was justly renowned*" (15). Once again, this can be associated with Bakhtin's idea of grotesque body as the ghost's body does not only transcend all boundaries and limitations of a regular person's physical body, he also possesses the ability to transform himself into an animal (a dog). The ghost's abject body that falls between the human and animal forms does fall under the sphere of the grotesque body and the ghost, subsequently, feels privileged to possess such special abilities for without them, his nocturnal hauntings would not have been carried out successfully. It can, thus, be said that possessing the grotesque body gives the ghost a sense of existence that in turn grants him more reasons to keep existing.

While meaning-making is a complicated and very personal journey, it is almost unavoidable that in order to create meanings that justify one's existence, individuals sometimes resort to ways which are slightly self-centred and individualistic. In relation to this, it is then feasible to examine how Sir Simon's endeavour in creating meanings in his life inclines towards ways which are narcissistic. As Mathas notes, narcissism refers to the creation of an idealized image of the self and the desire to merge with this image, often expressed as a mirror metaphor. The narcissistic fascination with one's mirror image captures both a search for the boundaries of a self and a yearning for self-expansion, or self-dissolution. Thus, narcissism can be viewed as testing the limits of the self by erecting borders where boundaries collapse and by transgressing limits where borders threaten the individual's sense of autonomy and flexibility (9). In view of this, narcissism falls under the sphere of the grotesque as the grotesque too, refers to anything that is incongruity to the norms as explained by Clayborough (9).

However, narcissism is a complicated concept whose meaning goes beyond the notion of fascination of one's own image. Farrell offers a more inclusive definition of what narcissism actually entails in which he theorizes that narcissism has been commonly understood as intense, if not excessive preoccupation with the self. The preoccupation with the self can be tied to feelings of insecurity in view of the increased complexity and anonymity of an emerging bourgeois society (3). Thus, it can be understood that narcissism is hardly just a portrayal of one's self-obsession but instead, such phenomena is often caused by one's sense of insecurity brought upon by an external force. In view of this, it is noteworthy to examine the character of Sir Simon in line with the idea of narcissism as introduced by Kohut. As Kohut notes, the narcissistically defective adults often suffer from a lack of self-approval, they feel obliged to satisfy these essential needs through external sources: by extracting praise from or exercising unquestioned dominance over others. Moreover, their lack of a stable cohesive self serves as the reason why they suffer from a lack of personality. The struggle between the feelings of greatness side by side with low self-esteem, and may respond to the frustration of their exhibitionistic impulses with both shame and rage (418-420).

When examined closely, Sir Simon does portray many traits that resemble what Kohut terms as a narcissistically defective adult. Sir Simon's internal world often portrays emotions that oscillate between a sense of self-approval and frustration. As Wilde wrote, "*with the enthusiasm egotism of the true artist, he went over his most celebrated performances*" (13), and despite his multiple failed attempts in scaring the Otis, Sir Simon is resilient enough to bounce back from his failure. This can be seen from the following line; "*while dressed for the part of Black Isaac, or the Huntsman of Hogley Woods. He resolves to make one final effort to assert his dignity and social position, and determined to visit the insolent young Etonians the next night in his celebrated character of "Reckless Rupert, or the Headless Earl"*" (22). Sir Simon is clearly a narcissistic individual for he not only takes his haunts seriously, he regards them as a way for him to assert his dignity and social position. However, whenever his well-planned haunts fail to deliver, he will be overwhelmed with a sense of disappointment and distress because his nocturnal hauntings are executed for reasons of sheer vanity. Sir Simon's disappointment can be read from the following excerpt:

*On reaching his room he entirely broke down, and became a prey to the most violent agitation. The vulgarity of the twins, and the gross materialism of Mrs. Otis, were naturally extremely annoying, but what distressed him most was that he had been unable to wear the suit of mail (16)*

And when he was counter ambushed by the Otis, "*he arrives in his own room in a terrible state of dirt, disorder and despair*" (24) It seems like Sir Simon is about to give in to his sense of inferiority about being outsmarted by the Otis twins as "*his nerves were completely shattered, and he started at the slightest noise*" (21), but he is able to bounce back from his sense of inferiority and later begins to "*make arrangements for appearing to Virginia's little lover in his celebrated impersonation of The Vampire Monk, or the Bloodless Benedictine*" (26).

Indeed Sir Simon struggle between the feelings of greatness side by side with low self-esteem, and may respond to the frustration of their exhibitionistic impulses with both shame and rage. In fact, when he found out that he was tricked by the Otis twins, Wilde wrote;

*The old Canterville look came into his eyes; he ground his toothless gums together; and raising his withered hands high above, swore according to his picturesque phraseology of the antique school, that, when Chanticleer had sounded twice his merry horn, deeds of blood would be wrought, and murder walk abroad with silent feet (20)*



Sir Simon's emotions constantly fluctuate between a sense of superiority and inferiority and this lends credence to the claim that he is in actuality a narcissistic individual. What is worth noting is that the juxtaposition of the feelings of greatness side by side with low self-esteem that motivate Sir Simon to keep existing as for him, being able to execute a haunt that is able to shock the Otis, which has turned into his reason for existing. Thus, it can be argued that his narcissism has granted him meaning in life and it has, indirectly, given him the reason to keep existing.

Aside from examining how Sir Simon deals with his concern of meaninglessness, this paper also aims to explore how the grotesque plays a part in helping Sir Simon copes with the concern of death. According to Yalom, death is the biggest concern for all individuals as it signifies the end of all possibilities. Yalom believes that death is the primary source of anxiety and death can lead to various self-inflicted limitations. Individuals who suffer from existential crisis often contemplate upon the fear of death and as Yalom sees it, such fear needs to be repressed. Lifton and Olsen assert that in order to repress our fear of death, we go into a state of what he terms as symbolic immortality. By creating a state of symbolic immortality, we never cease to exist after death but instead, part of us lives vicariously through a secondary form of life. For instance, we may continue to live materially through the things we created and built when we are alive, or we can also live ephemerally through our thoughts, values, joke, influence, contributions, doctrines, and ideas.

#### OVERCOMING THE ANXIETY OF DEATH THROUGH THE GROTESQUE

The concept of death has been discussed and explored at length in the field of literature. The idea of death is still largely deemed as a form of taboo in many cultures. Death creates anxiety and fear in us but sometimes death can also be regarded as a form of motivation. For instance, Alsudairy (2012), in examining the concept of death in Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie*, explains that Morrie clings to life not because he is afraid of dying or because he fears what will become of him after his death, but because his greatest dying wish is to share his story with Albom so that he may share it with the world and learn from it. The approach of death serves as a form of motivation for him to leave something behind, something good by which he can be remembered.

When read closely, the same desire as felt by Morrie can be seen in Sir Simon. Although Sir Simon is strictly speaking a ghost in *The Canterville Ghost* and this means he has already experienced death prior to him becoming a ghost, what is worth examining is that death still brings some form of anxiety and fear in him. However, his anxiety and fear resulted from death are slightly different from a living being. Instead, his anxiety and fear arise from being completely forgotten and that no one in this world will remember that he ever existed. Sir Simon looks forward to crossing the garden of death as that will eventually allow his spirit to rest in peace and this can be seen from the following lines;

*Yes, death. Death must be so beautiful. To lie in the soft brown earth, with the grasses waving above one's head, and listen to silence. To have no yesterday, and no tomorrow. To forget time, to forget life, to be at peace. You can help me. You can open for me the portals of death's house, for love is always with you, and love is stronger than death is." (30)*

Sir Simon yearns for being at peace but for hundreds of years since he was murdered, he has been waiting until the right person to come into his life, the one whom he believes will eventually save him from his sorrowful existence. When Virginia Otis comes into his life, he

knows that the right person has emerged and that he must convince her to open the portals of death's house for him. Virginia holds the key to bringing peace into Canterville as Wilde wrote:

*“When a golden girl can win  
Prayer from out the lips of sin,  
When the barren almond bears,  
And a little child gives away its tears,  
Then shall all the house be still  
And Peace comes to Canterville (30)*

Little is made known to the readers about Virginia in the beginning of the novel until her path crosses with Sir Simon's. It is then readers are made aware of the fact that Virginia is “*sweet, good and gentle*” (30). As Malcolm sees it, paradoxically, it is the Otises' daughter, Virginia, who embodies the Wildean themes of the power of innocence and the value of sacrifice. It is she who eventually talks to and listens to the ghost, and who saves him, by putting herself at sinister risk. She also comes out of it all not just with jewels, but with a knowledge and an experience she is reluctant to impart to anyone, even to her husband (184). Virginia plays a significant role in Sir Simon's life as she will not only be the one who has the ability to open the portals of death's house for him, but Virginia will be the only person whom Sir Simon can live symbolically after he has crossed over the portals.

When examined critically, Virginia's character means more than what Wilde described as *sweet, good and gentle* (30). Virginia's character can also be further studied from the lens of the grotesque. It is clear that Virginia is an adolescent in the novel, making it possible to study her character from the perspective of the female grotesque body. Gleeson theorizes that the female adolescent is particularly amenable to an exploration of the categories of freak and grotesque since, historically, women have been perceived as freakish, a perception stemming from a biblical tradition that considers women “lesser men.” Different cultural practices have tended to represent women's “malformed” bodies as fluid and amorphous. The female adolescent is even more “grotesque” than her adult counterpart: not only is she female, but she is in that liminal state between childhood and adulthood (12).

Being in that liminal state, Virginia exudes both the child-like faculty and precociousness within the same body and this enables her to be associated with the grotesque. Jafni and Syuhada (2014) examine how the grotesque and nature can be incorporated via the grotesque representations of human-nature interconnectedness and in doing so, conclude that duality such as repulsive/attraction is one of the hallmarks of the grotesque. Virginia being in that liminal state, clearly possesses the characteristics that resemble her with such grotesque duality, whose character now is regarded as grotesque-inclined. However, it is noteworthy that it is Virginia whom Sir Simon needs to rely on to open the portals of death's door and it is also Virginia whom Sir Simon can live symbolically after he ceases to exist. Virginia knows all of his secrets knowing full well that Virginia will keep all of them in her heart. Towards the ending of the story when asked by her husband on what transpired when she was locked up with the ghost, her only reply was “*Please don't ask me, Cecil, I cannot tell you. Poor Simon! I owe him a great deal. He made me see what Life is, and what Death signifies, and why Love is stronger than both*” (41). What we know is that not only Sir Simon's secret will live on through Virginia but his influence on Virginia about how love conquers everything will also be immortalised as long as Virginia lives. This can be related to what Olsen and Lifton term as symbolic immortality. Olsen and Lifton posit that by creating a state of symbolic immortality, we never cease to exist upon death but instead, part of us lives vicariously through another person or object. As discussed earlier, it is possible for us to continue living materially through the things that we have created, built and given birth to when we are alive, or we can also live through our contributions or memories people have about us. In Sir Simon's case, his

immorality is achieved through the fact that Virginia will continue to live even after he is long gone.

On top of that, Sir Simon's legacy can also be immortalised through the jewels he has left for Virginia as "*they were perfectly magnificent, especially a certain rube necklace with old Venetian setting, which was really a superb specimen of sixteen-century work, and their value was so great that Mr Otis felt considerable scruples about allowing his daughter to accept them*" (37). Perhaps, Sir Simon himself was a hedonist when he was alive and by leaving behind such extravagant gifts for Virginia, it can then be examined through what Edward and Graulund term as excess and extravagance for it lacks moderation. For a young girl like Virginia to be presented with "*gems that are of great monetary worth*" (38) can be read as a way of permitting her to indulge in excessiveness and such act is undoubtedly grotesque-inclined as excessiveness and extravagance are often associated with the grotesque since it is incongruity with what is perceived as normal and acceptable. In short, Sir Simon's presence continues to live on through an adolescent girl and his impressive collection of jewels which can both be closely linked to the grotesque and this lends credence to the idea that the grotesque has been able to ease his concern of death or more specifically in his case, the anxiety and fear of ceasing to exist in totality.

## CONCLUSION

The grotesque that started out as being an idea that was negatively perceived is now more widely accepted and recognized as a literary trope that is all-encompassing. This can be seen through how the grotesque is beginning to gain popularity and acceptance in dark comedies, works of fictions or even children literature. More literary scholars are also beginning to explore the functions of the grotesque beyond its traditional forms. The grotesque, for instance, has been explored as a form of propaganda tool to raise awareness on certain issues that are deemed unfair or distorted. When certain worldviews are being distorted and portrayed in a way that is grotesquely unfair, people begin to pay attention to something that they will otherwise overlook. Having said that, it is imperative to note that this study does not aim to champion that idea that the grotesque works well for everyone as a way to deal with existential concerns or that the grotesque should be accepted as a means to deal with existential concerns. Instead, it only seeks to show that the idea works effectively well for the main character, Sir Simon, particularly to help him overcome or subdue his existential concerns. While many may still not be able to adopt the grotesque as a means to help them deal with their existential concerns, this study aims to show that it can serve as an alternative for some individuals to overcome their existential concerns. Lastly, everyone needs a reason to justify their own existence. When faced with the unbearable burden brought upon by the concerns of death and meaninglessness, our basic survival instincts are naturally alerted and we begin to seek ways to create reasons and meanings to justify our own existence. Sir Simon's attempt to suppress his anxiety and fear brought upon by the existential concerns of death and meaninglessness is deemed fruitful as he has been able to find peace at the end of the story. Sir Simon who started out as an aimless being who struggled with overcoming his burden of existence has been able to find the ultimate closure that grants him eternal peace. As shown in this study, Sir Simon did it by relying on the grotesque to deal with his existential concerns. Hence, this study lends credence to the claim that the grotesque is certainly able to go beyond its literal and negatively-perceived meanings and this also validates the idea that even the grotesque can be employed as a means to help individuals deal with their existential concerns. At least, in the case of Sir Simon Canterville, the grotesque seems to work perfectly well in helping him deal with his

concerns of death and meaninglessness. At last, the ghost who wondered aimlessly in that mansion has been able to find what he wanted and needed the most, eternal peace.

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