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Literary Theories

Exploring the Grotesque in T. S Eliot's Poems

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Abstract: Apart from the many issues on which T. S. Eliot's critics and scholars have focused, the study of the grotesque in Eliot's works has received little attention. Hence, this paper tries to read Eliot's poems through the lens of Grotesque elements. Eliot's works are full of images that allude to the bleakness of the modern world and paint an unflattering picture of it through the distorted and ugly images. His poetry is explosive, iconoclastic, violent, injurious, terrifying, and darkly optimistic, or it could be described as implicitly grotesque. In doing so, poems falling under his early writings such as Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock, Mr. Appolinx are selected as such poems offer a rich source of core grotesque elements. The grotesque element in these poems strengthens the fear of uncertainty. The paper aims to focus on how Eliot has adopted grotesque as a medium to portray the decay of the modern civilization.

Keywords: Grotesque, Ugly, Prufrock, Appolinx, Sweeny.



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Introduction

The present work is a study of T.S. Eliot from the perspective of Grotesque. Eliot's works are set up in an atmosphere of horror, mystery, fear, disgust, and terror creating ambivalence and suspense. To create these emotions in the reader, Eliot had created a series of events and images one after another in his works which act as the objective- correlative to provide a deep insight into the study of grotesque. The elements of ugly and mysterious in the poetry of Eliot can be aptly grouped under the grotesque. The grotesque elements in the works of Eliot can be read in the light of uncertainty. The term grotesque defines something which is distorted, ugly, malformed, and mysterious. It is derived from the Italian word "grotto" or "grotta" which was used to describe the architecture and paintings on the walls of the caves in Rome during the fifteenth century (the grotesque and the gothic literature 32). The ugly and malformed attracts the attention of the reader alongside evoking feelings of fear, uncertainty, and disgust. John Ruskin suggests that "ludicrous" and "fearful" (Steig 255) are the two most important components of grotesque. In terms of Wolfgang Kayser grotesque is "the estranged world" (Kayser 184) and an "attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (Kayser 188). Further, he suggests that any situation or object can be classified as grotesque with its unfamiliar nature. However, James Schevill defines the term grotesque as "distorted, fantastic ugly" (Schevill 229). In the twentieth century, the grotesque became an important theme among the writers such as W. B. Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, H.G. Wells, as they were "greatly occupied with Apocalypse; the sense that things are falling apart, nor can the centre hold accounts for the sense of estrangement, aimlessness and dark anarchy, reflecting the terrors and grotesqueries of Revelation" (Harpham 467).

The concept of alienation becomes more consequential with the element of grotesque. An alienated individual experiences more weirdness. Ayse Ece Ayhan in the article "Alienation, Isolation, Loneliness and the Grotesque" asserts that "the weirdness or the grotesqueness starts from the isolation or from the alienation itself. Grotesque is a unique genre concerning the outcomes of the human condition of alienation from themselves" (Ayhan 01). Ayhan in his article further states that the connection between the gothic and the grotesque can be exemplified by H. P. Lovecraft's *The Outsider*. The narrator in the story contemplates himself as an alien to society. Though the narrator is a mummy he finds himself a misfit in the society (Ayhan). Such is the case with Eliot's characters. Their loneliness results in their realization of the distorted and ugly monster-like appearance which makes them misfit in the society they live in. James Schevill says that "Grotesque is what we become when we seclude ourselves in the suburban community closed to wonder, the mechanical mirage of technological comfort" (Schevill 238).

The study of horror characterizes mystery, fear, terror, dark, disgust, bizarre, and tension. To illustrate these characteristics the writers employed unfamiliar events and situations, deformed characters of monsters and ghosts in their writings. Such writings bring in the element of grotesque. Gothic grotesque concentrates more on disgust rather than laughter.

Eliot and Grotesques

The “Grotesque instills fear of life rather than fear of death” (Kayser 185) and so Eliot in his poem depicts modern man’s fear of life or death in life. Grotesque can be a state of confusion “as to whether to laugh or to be afraid, whether to interpret the phenomenon before us as belonging to a real-world of our senses or some fantastic world beyond their reach” (Kayser 184). The characters of Eliot are a rich source of grotesque. Some of Eliot’s characters are blend of human and animal traits or they have a desire to become an animal. The character of Mr. Apollinax is an amalgamation of ‘Apollo’, the god of discipline, and the devil, Apolloyn who represents the symbol of demonic or Dionysian. It is a mixture of good and evil. The caricature of Mr. Apollinax is “fearful” and “ludicrous”. Mr. Apollinax’s “laughter” (Eliot “Apollinax” 02), “submarine and profound”(08), “the old man of the sea...Hidden under coral islands”(09-10) and a head “grinning over a screen/ With seaweed in its hair” (14-15) gives an impression of his grotesque appearance which “resembles to nonhuman forms-animals or mechanisms- they seem both fearful and comic” (Nettels 151).

Further, in the poem, there is a reference to Centaurs. It is an example of a monstrous character drawn from Greek mythology. He is half human and half animal, with a head of a human and the body of a horse. These bestial characters living in the secluded areas are not governed by any law and order and therefore represent inhumanity, brutality, and the “fluid transformations from “‘civilization’ to ‘barbarism’” (Edwards 38). Through the character of Centaur in “Mr. Apollinax”, Eliot apprehends that civilization is turning into a space where human beings have lost their identities and where the line between good and evil is blurred. Centaurs exemplify that “the world of grotesque is not always the ordinary world of human beings, but nor does it necessarily signal a realm of unadulterated monstrosity” (Edwards 37). It represents that “human figures merge with other forms of life” (37).

Prufrock is another example of the grotesque body as he is much concerned about his deformed body: “how his hair is growing thin!” (Eliot “Prufrock” 41) and “how his arms and legs are thin!” (44). He further says;

when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall” (57-58).

...I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter (Eliot, “Prufrock” 82).

Prufrock’s condition can be related to the situation of Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. Gregor Samsa finds that he has been “transformed in his bed into an enormous bug...his numerous legs, pitifully thin in comparison to the rest of his girth, flickered helplessly before his eyes” (Kafka 25). Kafka in the above lines has tried to picture the physical degradation of the character just as Eliot has presented Prufrock in the poem. Gregor “acquired the habit of crawling in all directions across the walls and the ceiling” and further “he enjoyed hanging on the ceiling” (Kafka 71). Similarly, Prufrock is found “sprawling on a pin and wriggling on the wall” (Eliot “Prufrock” 57-58). Robert C. Evans states:

Gregor begins badly, but his situation eventually becomes worse and worse. He becomes even more obviously an insect (an even less obviously a human) by the end of the story than he was at the beginning, and it is this steady degradation that helps add to the grotesqueness of the tale (Evans 140). This is very much akin to Prufrock who towards the middle of the poem suffers the same physical degradation and desires to be a “pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (Eliot “Prufrock” 73-74). Both the protagonists undergo acute loneliness and their actions depict grotesqueness. F. Scott Fitzgerald in his novel *The Great Gatsby* says that “The loneliest moment in someone’s life is when they are watching their whole world fall apart, and all they can do is stare blankly” (Fitzgerald).

Similarly, Sweeney, in the poem “Sweeney Among the Nightingales”, appears as an abnormal human due to his monstrosity. Apart from the mythological reference, the poem is a rich source of grotesque elements. Sweeney represents the callousness and mechanical existence of modern men. His distorted figure is well depicted in these lines:

Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees
Letting his arms hang down to laugh
The zebra stripes along his jaw
Swelling to masculate giraffe (Eliot, “Sweeney Among” 01-04).

The ape-like Sweeny is found in some restaurant or some brothel spreading his knees and his arms hanging down. His physical appearance is “ludicrous” and “fearful”. Sweeny’s animalistic appearance depicts him as an ‘anthropomorphized figures’. The other characters in the poem also appear fearful and ludicrous. The waiter appears as a “silent man in mocha brown” sprawling at the “window-sill and gapes” (18), brings oranges, “bananas figs and hothouse grapes” (20).

Meanwhile, the nightingales are heard singing near “the Convent of the Sacred Heart” (36). Their singing reminds of the nightingales singing at the time of the murder of Agamemnon. They “sang within the bloody wood” (37). The sudden intrusion of the nightingales at the end of the poem gives a sense of an “estranged world”. The nightingales evokes an uncanny feeling by depicting the world which was once familiar has now transformed into chaos and terror.

Apart from portraying monstrous human beings, Eliot uses the parts of the body such as eyes, head, hands, fingers, hair, feet, face, etc to generate the uncanny. Eliot in almost every poem has depicted the fragmented body parts. This showcases the horrific condition of a man trapped in the modern world, where he is reduced to mere body parts. Prufrock recognizes himself in bits and parts. He is extremely conscious of his body parts including, his legs, arms. For Prufrock, his fragmented body parts are the source of horror for himself. This is like what Philip Brophy says that the horror of the body is “the fear of one’s own body” (Sedwick 08). According to Mariwan N. Barzinji “the people in the poem also appear as disembodied parts or ghostly creatures” (Barzinji 54). To present certain characters Eliot has only used their body parts. They appear as “face that you meet” (Eliot “Prufrock” 27), “arms that are braceleted and white and bare” (63), “eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase” (56). Similarly, in “Prelude” synecdoche is depicted as:

You curled the papers from your hair,
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet

In the palms of both soiled hands (Eliot “Prelude” 36-39).

Here “the soiled hands” refers to the immoral activities which is performed by the human.

Another example is found in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” where the female character is portrayed through her fragmented body parts;

She winks a feeble eye,

She smiles into corners.

She smooths the hair of the grass.

...A washed-out smallpox cracks her face,
 Her hand twists a paper rose, (Eliot, "Rhapsody" 52-57)
 This in gothic literature;

Specific parts of the body are emphasized for a particular effect or horrific moment. For instance, the changing appearance of teeth, ears, eyes, and hair are employed for the transforming monstrous body to illustrate the emerging beastliness and abnormality of the once human (Conrich and Sedgwick 01).

Similarly the poem "Whispers of Immortality", focuses on the dreadful images of the parts of the body such as "the skull beneath the skin" (Eliot "Whispers" 02), "breastless creatures" (03), "lipless grin"(04), "sockets of the eyes!"(06), "dead limbs" (07), "argue of the skeleton"(14), "fever of the bone"(16), "dry ribs"(31). The fragmented body parts remind one of Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*. *Frankenstein* is an example of a Gothic body where the monster is created by assembling the different body parts from several corpses. *Frankenstein* "is a text which, crucially, is about the body [...] indeed, it is more obviously about the body than any other novel in the Western tradition" (Conrich and Sedgwick 07) Eliot in his poems presents human bodies in its fragmented and distorted forms to portray fragmentation in life.

The poem, "Hysteria" evokes fear through the fragments of body parts. In the poem, the horrifying laughter of the lady is strikingly gothic. The continuous loud laughter of the lady keeps the speaker in suspense. The wide-open mouth of the lady and the imagination of the speaker being sucked into her mouth create horror. An ugly picture of a woman is being presented with "dark caverns of her throat" (Eliot "Hysteria") and "ripple of unseen muscles" makes her more grotesque.

As she laughed, I was involved in her laughter and being a part of it, until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad drill. I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles (Eliot "Hysteria"). Her laughter can be associated with the grotesque laughter which:

can also have a dark side: laughter can be ridiculing, alienating, inclusive/exclusive and hierarchical; it is sometimes associated with intoxication or even madness, as in hysterical laughter; and it can include scathing wit, the politically- charged weapon of irony, the blatant attack or merely condescension (Edwards and Graulund n.p).

Her laughter reveals that the lady tries to conceal the dark realities of life. Similarly, the laughter of Apollinax reflects his awareness about the dark side of life and also reflects his alienation. "His laughter tinkled among the teacups" (Eliot "Apollinax" 02). "He laughed like an irresponsible foetus./ His laughter was submarine and profound" (07-08).

Grotesque in gothic literature can thus be understood as; the source of the terror of the grotesque is not a specific situation but the human condition itself, '... not the sudden, selfish, and contemptible fear of immediate danger, but the fear which arises out of the contemplation of great powers in destructive operation, and generally from the perception of the presence of death' (Mc Elory 03).

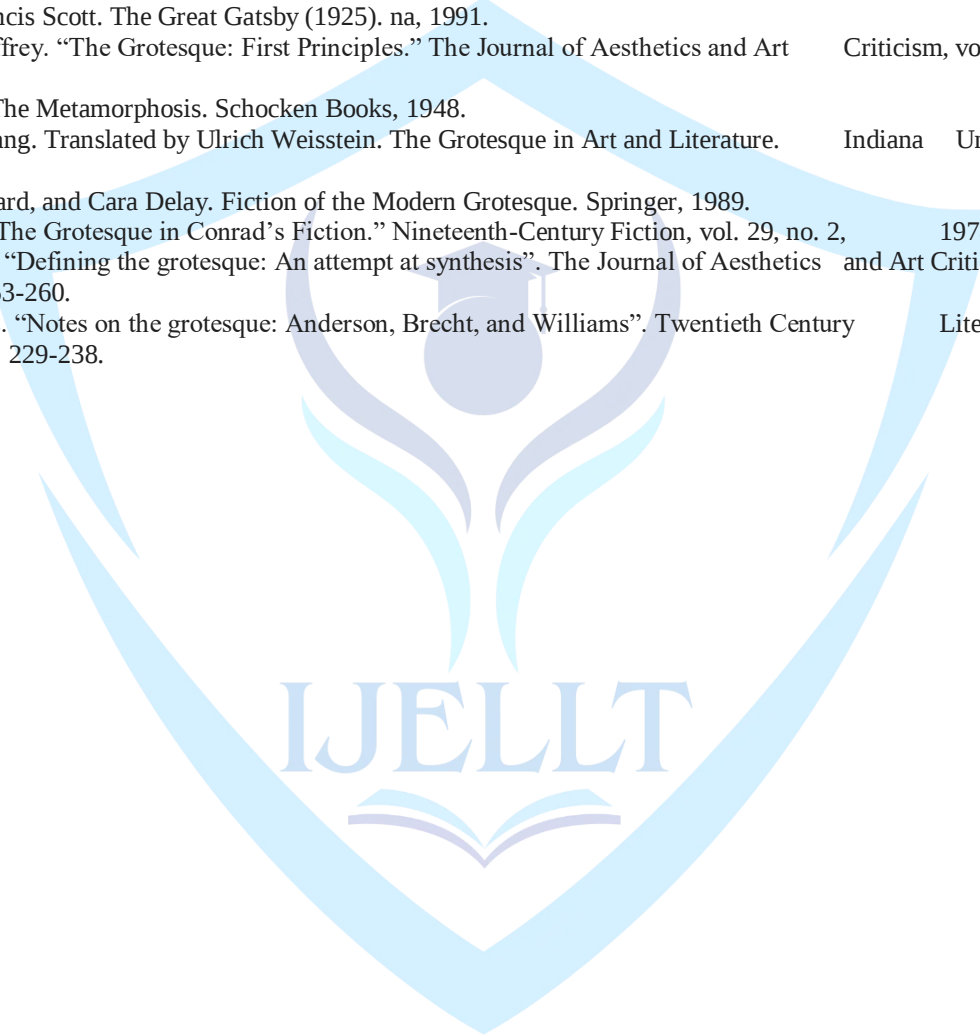
In Eliot's poetry, the grotesque is the darker side of the whole human civilization which has been presented by the characters in his poems. The characters are aware of the futility of their existence which arises from a sense of inner disruption. During the nineteenth century writers such as Poe, Hawthorne, Stevenson, Wilde, Dostovesky considered grotesque as "a sense of inner disruption, to a self radically alienated from a dissolving social structure, an increasingly pointless world" (Harpham 467). This "inner disruption" is reflected in Eliot's characters as they are socially alienated figures.

Conclusion

Grotesque elements in the poetry of T. S. Eliot often appear through ugly, distorted, and alienated characters. Figures such as Prufrock, Apollinax, and Sweeney are deeply isolated from society and from their own selves. Their sense of alienation becomes so intense that they begin to perceive themselves in distorted and grotesque forms. This distortion reflects not only their inner psychological turmoil but also the dehumanizing effects of modern urban life. The modern city, with its spiritual emptiness, fragmentation, and moral decay, contributes significantly to their feelings of estrangement and transforms them into symbols of the grotesque condition of modern humanity. Although Eliot was a writer of 1920's, but his writings are remarkably relevant today. Eliot at that time was writing to project the decay of the world because of the wars, industrialization and urbanization but the same sense of fragmentation is observed today in the world because of the rapid growth of AI and advance technologies. Human beings are still struggling with the questions of identity, authenticity and human bonds.

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