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Final Term Paper

English 224 Dr. Bondurant

Malformed, deformed, distorted. The “Grotesque”, a seemingly simple idea on the surface. However, diving beneath the surface, the word grotesque becomes quite complex given the many different ways one idea or thing can be identified as such. The Merriam-Webster dictionary describes the definition of grotesque as “a style of decorative art characterized by fanciful or fantastic human and animal forms often interwoven with foliage or similar figures that may distort the natural into absurdity, ugliness, or caricature”. *Winesburg Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson, *White Noise* by Don DeLilo, and a collection of poems from *Good Poems* collected by Garrison Keillor all contain distinct examples of how either characters, technology, or both contain grotesque qualities of their own. In *Winesburg Ohio* the grotesque qualities of characters can be seen as a blessing, and through *White Noise*, technologies grotesque qualities amplify how harmful technology can truly be.

To begin, diving first into the overlapping theme of the “Grotesque”, *Winesburg Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson contains an abundance of characters which possess the qualities which one could define as grotesque. Wing Biddlebaum who appears in the story of “Hands” is an old man who lives on the edge of town. While lonely and reclusive, Wing Biddlebaum remains an icon to the town through the effort and efficiency in which his hands work. “They became his distinguishing feature, the source of his fame. Also, they made more grotesque and already grotesque and elusive individuality. Winesburg was proud of the Hands of Wing Biddlebaum in the same spirit in which it was proud of Banker White’s new stone house and Wesley Moyer’s bay stallion that has won the two fifteen trot at the fall races in Cleveland” (Hands, 4). Wings hands seen as a curse to him plagued by his past are seen really as a blessing to the town. Mangled and rutted, Wings hands carry a certain amount of respect with the townspeople, even if Biddlebaum doesn’t realize it.

In the poem Elders by Louise Bogan, A parallel can be drawn to the elderly of the poem to Wing Biddlebaum. “The black wheeled berries turn Weighing the bows over the road. There is no harvest. Heavy to withering, the black wheels bend, ripe for the mouths of past lovers, or birds.” The comparison comes as the elders are being seen as the black fruit identified in the poem. These berries, the elderly, continue to work yet they are described to heavy and withering. In the very beginning of Hands, Wing is described “a fat little old man walked nervously up and down. Across a long field that had been seeded for clover but had produced only a dense crop of yellow mustard seeds.” (3). Both seem to work fields yet neither yield a harvest. In both there is a portrayal of the elderly who do work yet they aren’t fit for the job, and both fail to yield harvests of what they desire. Exemplifying the image of grotesque figures working for something yet neither achieve their goal. The grotesque image of the heavy to withering elderly as their black wheels bend is a direct personification of an elder trying to work in a field yet they are close to failing, wheels seen as their legs are literally bending black from strain and work. Wings other grotesque quality of being short and fat fit the poem as to he shouldn’t be doing the work and yet he sees it as the only thing he can do because he must work, to keep his hands satisfied. Another similarity to Wing Biddlebaum and the poem Elders can be made. In which Wing and the berries personified are past their prime and have missed their true moment in time. Elders ends with the line “The seed of the year beyond the year.” While this can be interpreted a few ways, it seems the poem is saying the seed has missed its perfect time to be ripe, like saying the elderly are in a year beyond their own. While they once were able to do the labor in their past they have grown to old and struggle with their place now. The same can be said for Wing. In his prime Wing was known as Adolph Myer, a profound schoolteacher who taught students with his hands, but was driven out for being accused of something he did not do. Because Wings true calling was to be a teacher back in his past, we can say that he is similar to the elderly in the poem. Wing is past his moment in the light so to speak, he’s no longer teaching and his restless hands go to waste. This brings a grotesque look at the idea of ageing such as the process slowly wears your body and mind down to the point where you’re no longer able to fulfill your passion in life.

To continue the idea of grotesque qualities emerging themselves in *Winesburg Ohio*, Wing Biddlebaum isn’t the only one who has these qualities. Doctor Reefy has many similarities himself, even more so having to do with his hands. Just like Wings Hands Doctor Reefy’s hands come to show how these grotesque qualities can be enjoyed and seen as great by those who understand. “Winesburg had forgotten the old man, but in doctor Reefy there were the seeds of something very fine.” (7). The doctor not like Wing was forgotten by the town, and was seemingly alone with only a few friends in the whole town. This is until a tall dark-skinned girl come to see him for the sweetness, he had inside of him. “The condition that had brought her to him passed as an illness, but she was like one who has discovered the sweetness of the twisted apples, she could not get her mind fixed again upon the round perfect fruit that is eaten in the city apartments” (8-9). This tall Dark-skinned girl had found the good in the doctors’ grotesque qualities, his hands recently being compared to the shriveled apples that grow in Winesburg. The doctor being forgotten by the town yet being discovered by a girl who the whole town thought was beautiful shows how grotesque qualities of those in Winesburg can still attract love and affection, and bring the best out of some people. Once again, we can draw a parallel from the Doctor Reefy to the elderly in our previous poem *Elders*. In the way that the doctor is an old grotesque man forced to work even though his body is beginning to fail him. However, this line of the poem stands out to me, the poem states “Heavy to withering the black wheels bend, Ripe for the chance of lovers, or birds.” In this I believe the poem comes true in the fact that the doctor found love from a chance lover in the woman, and yet they get compared to birds who are known for migration or flying away. The doctor’s wife, does die a year after he finds her, leaving his own grotesque qualities to himself as the town ignores him. Even more so you can see the grotesque idea of love portrayed in both “Paper Pills” and Elders. Ripe for the mouths of chance lovers, or birds, seems to say that love is fleeting, that once you find love it can fly easily away not to be seen again. For the Doctor he found his chance lover, but she passes away with in a year showing how fleeting these chance lovers love can really be.

As Winesburg Ohio has many examples of how the grotesque qualities of man seems to benefit those in the town and sometimes themselves, *White Noise* by Don Delilo is quite different in the ways it tackles the idea of the “Grotesque”. Don Delilo prefers to use technology and more specifically how it has advanced to skew certain truths characters in the stories are trying to find. Technology seen in *White Noise* is seen less as a blessing and more of a screen that distorts, contorts, and twists information, making it harder to see a true path, and making everything skewed in the eyes of the beholder. In this case Jack Gladney is going to be the first to get analyzed on how the grotesque qualities of technology skew his path and make his life that much more difficult. “What if death is nothing but sound?” “electrical noise” “You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful.” “Uniform, white”. (276) Jack struggles with the idea of death. The character Jack finds out he has been exposed to a lethal chemical and only has to come to terms that his life will be cut short. This is an impending issue for jack as he feels he can no longer see clearly because of technology, and because of technologies fast advancements feels that what if in the end its just static. There is no after life, that once you die the in the sense screen just goes blank white, with the sound of quiet static. That’s what this quote is trying to portray and the grotesque abundance of technology drives jack to this point of almost madness fueled by that fact that this eventual end is coming for him. I believe it also drives jack mad that Electricity is forever and brings to light that he a living person is not forever, he has an expiration date, where as technology lives forever. This is a grotesque quality in and of itself because its unnatural everything lives and dies but electrons, protons dont, they are static living in this existence without an expiration date. Jack remarks on technology again, “The system was invisible, which makes it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies” (70). What stands out in this quote is “All the more disquieting to deal with.” And “were in accord. At least for now.” These I believe are the most important lines from the quote showing how jack feels about technology yet acknowledging the fact that at some point technology might not be on his side and it may turn against him. This relates to the idea of grotesque technology because it paints it as a nefarious figure with its own agenda, personifying the idea that it is more like a living thing. This idea is worrying to Jack, he doesn’t have control over it just like he doesn’t have control over death. From *Good Poems* Moderation is Not a Negation of Intensity, But Helps Avoid Monotony. It touches on the idea that practicing something in moderation shouldn’t affect how much you do something but, instead helps with keeping your life interesting and understandable. I think this can be taken into effect when referencing the grotesque amount of technology Jack is being introduced to. While Jack see’s this technology and thinks its too much its all he can think about and stress about, he becomes obsessed. The poem would rather Jack take that idea but remember that its only there to help in his struggle to find his truth, don’t see it as the end all be all truth. “Scrounge and be stupid, that doesn’t take much centering of ones forces;” The author of this poem is essentially telling Jack he’s looking for too much in technology, and that he is wasting his potential by worrying to no end about his eventual death and if it really just is a blank screen. Technology is definitely portrayed to a grotesque monstrosity in White Noise through the amount of pressure it puts on Jack almost seeming as the God to him not as a tool to be used to find truth.

Clearly there can be many ways in which grotesque traits can come out in these writings and poems. Whether it be the fact that a character may be unnerving, disgusting, or frightening, shows just how complex the idea of the “Grotesque” can really be. In each of these writings the grotesque was found to be the pushing factor for the characters motivations, and turns out even to be a strange blessing in disguise or a curse brought upon them. Either way the central theme of the “Grotesque” is brought out clearly and efficiently in *Winesburg Ohio*, *White Noise*, and many poems.

Works Cited

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