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Article abstract

The fiction of Barbara Gowdy is peopled with physically or spiritually aberrant characters that can trigger shock and disgust in readers. Her novel *Mister Sandman* (1995), however, calls for a more nuanced response to "the unusual," one triggered by Gowdy's parodic use of the gothic and grotesque as well as by instances of humour, comic relief, and a light-hearted tone. Such a combination of literary modes arouses sympathy for the novel's "monstrous" characters, making *Mister Sandman* representative of what Catherine Spooner calls the "Gothic-Carnavalesque." The novel's parodic rewriting of E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story "Der Sandmann" (1816), and Gowdy's use of grotesque imagery to produce humour rather than horror, are emblematic of what Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik call "the comic turn" in contemporary gothic fiction, and complicate the traditional concepts of the grotesque articulated by Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin.

The Gothic and Grotesque in Barbara Gowdy's *Mister Sandman*

HILDE STAELS

IN THE TITLE STORY of Barbara Gowdy's collection of grotesque short stories *We So Seldom Look on Love* (1993), the frustrated lover of a beautiful female necrophiliac says that his excessive curiosity about the protagonist's psychic aberration is "any curious man's fascination with the unusual" (155). This description could very well apply to Gowdy, whose fiction is peopled with physically or spiritually aberrant characters. The first reaction of readers to her deviant characters may be one of shock and disgust, as was indeed the case with *Helpless* (2007), the novel in which Gowdy renders a pedophile's monstrous sexual desires.¹ *Mister Sandman* (1995), however, calls for a more nuanced response to "the unusual," one triggered by a parodic use of the gothic² and grotesque mode as well as by instances of humour, comic relief, and a light-hearted tone. This essay's detailed investigation of *Mister Sandman* aims at demonstrating the subtle effects and the function of these formal aspects, which are also essential to Gowdy's narrative technique in her previously published short story collection.³

Critics writing on *We So Seldom Look on Love* strikingly fail to address Gowdy's parodic use of the grotesque mode.⁴ Yet, the grotesque is particularly prominent in all the stories from the collection and its function becomes especially clear when one studies the individual stories in relation to one another. These narratives deal primarily with the tyranny of the normative gaze on the lives of protagonists situated on a scale from minor to excessive deviance. Gowdy treats the mental and physical difference of her characters as a monstrous transgression of boundaries. In writing about this subject matter, she consistently mixes literary conventions of realism with the Gothic and especially the grotesque, which is an accompanying feature of the Gothic. The unusual characters inhabit a familiar, everyday world in which they struggle against normative perspectives on deviance and are shown to desire normality. The entire collection aims at criticizing human beings' common reliance on categorical either/or distinctions. "Normal" characters who

respond with fascination and fear to the deviant characters' "monstrosity" are shown to also fear the disturbing otherness within themselves. By confronting readers with the desires, anxieties, and vulnerabilities of characters whose minds or bodies deviate from the cultural norm, the stories expose our desire for "normality" and an illusory coherent, stable identity. The ironic inversion of this desire for normality in the story about a female necrophiliac actually reaffirms the dominant pattern in the collection. Yet, as in *Mister Sandman*, humour, a light-hearted tone, and comic relief also pervade these stories.

Gowdy's fiction, which uses conventions of the Gothic and grotesque parodically to critique cultural anxieties regarding difference, follows a trend that has been prominent in contemporary Canadian literature since the 1990s. This trend is distinct from the Canadian gothic fiction of the 1970s and earlier, which, in Margot Northey's view, is dominated by the "horrifying or fearful aspect" of the Gothic and grotesque (7). Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte state that terror in the face of an unknown wilderness has given way to a concern with "an interiorized psychological experience of gothic 'uncanniness' and illegitimacy" (ix). Justin D. Edwards treats Canadian gothic writing since the 1970s in terms of an obsession with national identity and an identification of "others as different to such contrived categories as race, ethnicity, religion, region, or sexual identity" (167). He discusses Gowdy's short stories in the context of "an extremely subversive streak" (164) in which the grotesque is "both a source of freedom *and* fear" that aims at interrogating "our ideas about monstrosity" (159). The same holds true for *Mister Sandman*, which Edwards does not touch upon. The novel mainly deals with characters desiring to transgress normative sexual relations, and the author parodically inscribes and subverts the fear of "immoral" and "aberrant" non-heterosexual desires.

Edwards relies, among others, on Judith Halberstam, who notices that the Gothic since the 1990s differs from earlier examples in that it tends to celebrate a healing and liberating encounter with alienated otherness. She states that much contemporary gothic fiction welcomes repressed "monstrous" difference as a constituent part of the self. Halberstam hails this tendency in neo-gothic fiction as follows: "The monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities, and so we need monsters and we need to recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities" (27).

Andrew Gibson similarly confirms the celebration of a monstrous mixture as a human condition in postmodern fiction when he stresses that “the thought of monstrosity is a liberating thought: it affirms the right to difference and variation, the possibility of becoming other” (271).

Susanne Becker, who briefly mentions *We So Seldom Look on Love* in her book on neo-gothic fiction by women writers, refers to Gowdy as one of many contemporary authors who use gothic conventions to challenge “cultural notions of gender construction” (286). Becker relies on Linda Hutcheon’s insight that contemporary women writers use parody as a narrative technique to deal with “monstrous” femininity or transgressive female behaviour. **Hutcheon defines parody in postmodern fiction** as “repetition with difference,” whereby a text or genre convention from the past is imitated and critically transformed by means of ironic inversion (*Theory* 32). To Hutcheon, parody is a literary device that has become “a most popular and effective strategy . . . — of black, ethnic, gay, and feminist artists — trying to come to terms with and to respond, critically and creatively, to the still predominantly white, heterosexual, male culture in which they find themselves” (*Poetics* 35).

This essay will argue that *Mister Sandman*, like *We So Seldom Look on Love*, and more than any of Gowdy’s other novels, is an exponent of what Horner and Zlosnik call “the comic turn” in contemporary gothic fiction. They remark that the comic effect in neo-gothic fiction may be achieved, for instance, through the combination of parody and the comic grotesque. They further observe that “in comic parodic Gothic, excess and the grotesque produce humour, not horror” (45). In *Mister Sandman*, Gowdy not only duplicates the bitter laughter that paradoxically accompanies the horror of the demonic grotesque, but also provides humour and comic relief that are both part of the folk grotesque. At the end of the novel, when her characters embrace difference, the reader is left with the impression that the scale tips towards the folk grotesque with its sense of transformation and liberation.

An important aspect of *Mister Sandman* that also needs investigation is Gowdy’s parodic rewriting of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s short story “Der Sandmann” (1816). The sandman in Hoffmann’s tale does not bring sleep and good dreams; he is a creature that tears out children’s eyes. The protagonist, Nathaniel, describes this uncanny figure as “a repellent spectral monster bringing misery, distress, and earthly ruination wherever he went” (90). On the one hand, Gowdy uses some gothic motifs

and frighteningly uncanny characters, such as Olympia and Coppola/Coppelius (the Sandman), from Hoffmann's dark Romantic tale in her contemporary narrative. On the other hand, she shows how the interaction of her guilt-ridden characters with uncanny ones ultimately results in the former's release of expelled "monstrous" passions and freedom from anxiety. Before looking into the complex aesthetics of the Gothic and grotesque in *Mister Sandman*, a brief introduction to the theory of the grotesque as an aesthetic category is required.

The Theory of the Grotesque

Contemporary ideas about the nature of the grotesque in art are indebted to the theories of Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin. Their understanding of the grotesque as an aesthetic category, however, is diametrically opposed. Critics also point out that both theories are reductive because each theorist largely ignores the ambiguity and indecision that is typical of the grotesque.

In *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, the German literary theorist Kayser depends for his definition of the grotesque to a great extent on the German Romantic tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann. Kayser is clearly influenced by Sigmund Freud's discussion of Hoffmann's nightmarish gothic tale "Der Sandmann" in his essay "Das *Unheimliche*." To Freud, Hoffmann as the pre-eminent exponent of fantastic literature is "the unrivalled master of the uncanny in literature" (209). For Kayser, the grotesque in its purest form is alien, inhuman, and uncanny. It instills fear of life rather than death and is a manifestation of impersonal demonic powers and horror that erupt from the unconscious.

Sylvie Debevec Henning, a recent theorist of the grotesque, criticizes Kayser for limiting the grotesque to a source of terror and destruction, which she believes does away with the ability of the grotesque "to unsettle and disturb" the reader (108). Kayser neglects "the force to provoke a rethinking of fundamental issues concerning the way we perceive ourselves and our world" (108). The same holds true for Bakhtin who, in Henning's view, in turn, overemphasizes the joyous and regenerative features of the folk grotesque in *Rabelais and his World*.

Bakhtin remarks about the Romantic grotesque that it "is in most cases nocturnal," as in Hoffmann's *Night Tales*, the volume of short stories that includes "Der Sandmann," translated as "The Sandman" (41). By contrast, light and jovial laughter characterizes the folk gro-

tesque, as in François Rabelais's sixteenth-century novels *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*. Bakhtin analyzes the medieval and Renaissance grotesque in relation to the culture of folk humour and the spirit of carnival, with its "lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract . . . to the material level" (19) and its ritualistic inversion of conventions. Thus, in Rabelais's novels, the celebration of the "low" body is presented in terms of its opposition to classical, harmonious, clean representations of the body in "high" art. Attention is given to carnivalesque laughter and the gay display of the body's lower parts (belly, buttocks, genital organs), and to images of fertilization and (re)birth, which explains why Rabelais excessively describes the body's primary functions of (over)eating, excreting, copulating, giving birth, and dying.

Kayser and Bakhtin agree that the grotesque disrupts our ordinary perception — the familiar categories and binary oppositions with which we order reality. Bakhtin is indebted to Kayser's insight that the familiar world is suddenly rendered strange through strategies of the grotesque such as reversal, mingling, and distortion. Both theorists believe that the admixture of the ludicrous with the monstrous causes a hesitation in both the characters' and readers' perception of events. Our familiar perception of reality is, moreover, disturbed through excess, exaggeration, and hyperbolism.

Contemporary theorists of the grotesque, who emphasize the impossibility of providing a univocal definition of the concept, put forward its affinity with paradox. In *The Grotesque*, Philip Thomson argues that "the paradox of attraction/repulsion" (51) is basic to the grotesque and that the mixture of incompatibles remains unresolved. In Henning's view, "the grotesque reveals that nothing is as clear and distinct as we would like" (107), and "the ambiguities and tensions are not to be resolved" (118). Geoffrey Galt Harpham observes that the grotesque disrupts our conventional logic, which "is built on an avoidance of contradiction" (53), and that it forms "a species of confusion" (xv). He also claims that, "though the grotesque is more comfortable in hell than in heaven, its true home is the space between" (8). Peter Fuß conceptualizes the grotesque as a paradoxical or chimerical category in which the satirical, the absurd, the comic, the fantastic, and the uncanny may be mixed (112).

In literary texts, the gothic and grotesque modes share a subversive potential in dealing with the return of disturbing elements that have

been expelled by dominant bourgeois society. Rosemary Jackson, who discusses the gothic mode in the context of fantasy literature, points out that the Gothic is subversive in that it interrogates and disrupts both the fictional conventions of realism and the norms and conventions of the “real” known world. The same holds true for the grotesque, which, like the fantastic, “can be seen as an art of estrangement, resisting closure, opening structures which categorize experience in the name of a ‘human reality’” (175). Thomson states that the grotesque does not have a “necessary affinity with the fantastic” and that it “derives at least some of its effect from being presented within a realistic framework, in a realistic way” (8). When released, repressed alterity disrupts culturally established boundaries and causes emotional disorientation in both characters and readers (58).

Catherine Spooner, who draws her inspiration from Horner and Zlosnik’s study of the comic turn in contemporary gothic fiction, introduces the term “Gothic-Carnavalesque” for contemporary gothic fiction that mixes the Romantic and the folk grotesque, and in which “the sinister is continually shading into the comic and vice versa” with a view to arousing “sympathy for the monster” (68-69). In what follows, Gowdy’s *Mister Sandman* is discussed as representative of the “Gothic-Carnavalesque.”

The Gothic and Grotesque in *Mister Sandman*

Mister Sandman deals with a middle-class family’s transgression of normative sexual relations in Toronto from the mid-1950s up to the mid-1970s. The novel explores the taboo of premarital sex and homoeroticism in a society that is homophobic and that proclaims monogamy. The father, Gordon Canary, remembers being overwhelmed by guilt at having a homosexual fantasy when he was twelve years old in 1927. Eventually, he “buried it alive, because when he recalled it again, thirty and a hundred lurid fantasies later, it was like the exhumation of a baby he’d fathered or killed, guilt thundering through him like jungle drums” (102). At age eighteen, he secretly read books from the university’s medical library with titles such as *Curing the Male Homosexual* and *Demonology and Homosexuality*. These books were catalogued under labels reflecting the normative judgments “Mental Disorders” and “Sexual Deviance” (85). When Gordon first dated Doris in 1938, homoerotic desire was taboo. Homosexuality was commonly viewed as

a perversion, an abnormality in middle-class culture. In the mid-1950s, Gordon and Doris Canary are living outwardly as a conventional, married couple with two daughters, Sonja and Marcia. The parents, however, are shown to secretly give free rein to their pleasure-seeking sexual appetites, exploring adulterous same sex and polygamy. At the same time, they suffer from homosexual panic in a heteronormative society.⁵ There is but a semblance of normality and conventionality within the Canary family's domestic sphere. Many "monstrous" passions that are hidden in the closet will be disclosed through the intervention, or interruption, of the bizarre Joan Canary. Joan is the illegitimate child of Doris and Gordon's fifteen-year-old daughter, Sonja, with whom Doris travels from Toronto to Vancouver to ensure the secrecy of Joan's real parentage. The novel starts with a description of Joan's birth in an "Old Folks' Home" in 1956.

From the very outset, the narrative revolves around uncertainty and paradox, and the fantastic is mixed with the mundane: the story opens, for example, with the question of whether Joan's birth requires a natural or a supernatural explanation. Some perceive her as a real person, whereas she is a phantom in the eyes of others. The author moves from one character's mind to another to explore their diverse, incompatible perspectives on reality. Thus, Doris initially explains Joan's muteness and echoing sounds as resulting from brain damage, for Sonja's baby fell "head-first onto the floor" at birth (1). To Sonja, her daughter is definitely not insane but an otherworldly creature that has returned from the dead. The two perspectives are mentioned side by side, as the newborn/born-again child supposedly screamed, "She's insane!" Or was it, "Oh! No! Not again!" (25). The fact that Joan may be both real and a spectral apparition is disquieting and inspires "eerie" feelings (26). Sonja believes Joan to be the ghostly revenant of the seventy-year-old Alice Gunn, who lived in the "Old Folks' Home." This character's name sounds like All is Gone, alluding to the idea that Joan is a ghost that emerges from the other side, or from the unconscious of other family members, in order to tax them. As far as Gordon is concerned, she may embody the phantom baby/homosexual desire that returns to haunt him because it was "buried alive" (102). In this context, it is significant that Joan eventually regresses and wets her pants "like a baby" (286) at age seventeen, when she is tired of witnessing too many family secrets and lies. Subsequently, she decides to give up living and is temporarily

"gone" to a "cold and silver place" (323): the unconscious, the space of repressed desires and anxieties.

Two leitmotifs in the novel, "the truth is only a version" and "the truth is only aversion," connect the postmodern epistemic crisis with a critical disturbance of the culturally "natural" and "normal." Because of Joan's radical difference, normal perception is shown to be inadequate to get at the truth about her (gender) identity. This deviant character is deceptively innocent when perceived with the human eye. It becomes gradually clear to the reader that all attempts at knowing who she really is fail because she personifies the grotesque. Joan is a "monstrous" figure who represents the breakdown of distinct categories and orders of being. She is liminal, in between, hovering between a human being and a puppet, doll-sized and making mechanical sounds. She is both physically deformed (a dwarf) and strangely beautiful, neither fully alive nor dead but capable of transgressing the boundary between life and death. Through the intervention of this hybrid character in the lives of the other family members, the conventional binary distinctions between normality and abnormality, the self and the other, good and evil, the human and the non-human are gradually experienced as permeable.

At the moment of Joan's birth, some people believe her to be uncanny in the Freudian sense of something "known of old and long familiar that returns from the past" ("The Uncanny" 217). The perception that Joan is Alice Gunn reincarnated introduces the novel's doppelgänger motif and the return of the repressed, or the emergence of that which has been rejected by the conscious mind. It is suggested that Joan embodies the difference hidden inside the other family members. Sonja marvels at her difference, saying, "She's not *like* any of us" (63). The impersonal narrator uses images that refer to Joan as emerging from "the other side" (88), or hiding in "the shadow" (89, 90), and in "the darkest corner" (92) of the mind. As a toddler, she significantly studies herself "in reflective surfaces" (64) and is preoccupied "with her reflection in the mirrored picture frame" (94). Joan's difference may, thus, be interpreted as the alienated alterity within the unconscious of the other family members. If Joan is a projection of the others' innermost desires and anxieties, she is also the gothic presence that disturbs all the certainties within the domestic circle and its balance of relationships. As the characters' doppelgänger, she is both the other as separate and alien and the other as an aspect of the self. The sense of Joan's apparition as

being uncanny is a psychological response to her in-betweenness: she returns to the surface as the repelled.

If Joan personifies the stranger inside Gordon, Doris, Marcia, and Sonja, or the alienated otherness within the self, then her inability to speak and her echoing sounds signal the existence of unspeakable secrets in the lives of the other family members. Her being in hiding and her silence "on the other side" reveals the others' concealed and silenced thoughts. Her extreme sensitivity to light and noise, and her desire for darkness and seclusion, are signs of their solitude and fear of being found out. Her ritual act of turning into a corpse announces the repression of their desires. Her panic when surrounded by too many people echoes Doris's and Gordon's homosexual panic, for Joan is surprisingly "not panicking" (321) any longer as soon as their unsaid and unseen same-sexual desires have been exposed within the family circle.

Gowdy also uses the gothic trope of the house haunted by unsaid and unsayable secrets. Forbidden closeted memories indeed haunt the Canary family's psychic "house." Immoderate erotic desire and fantasy, as well as same-sex love, are hidden beneath the surface of normal familial relations. Joan is the one who both literally and metaphorically makes the dark closet of the house into her home. When her foster father, Gordon Canary, crosses its threshold, he comes out as a homosexual while "lying with his head in his daughter's closet" (68). So do the other family members, who only reveal the dark unknown otherness of sexual transgression to Joan, whose muteness they erroneously believe assures total secrecy. Joan may be viewed as the monstrous other or the figure of the threshold that surprisingly triggers the other characters' unconscious desires and fears. She is the one who possesses secret knowledge, for the family members only confess their transgressions while paying her a visit in the closet. They do not allow potentially subversive thoughts and desires to officially see the light.

Along with their conflicting perspectives on Joan, the other family members struggle with their own difference as defined by the normative point of view. Marcia knows that she is shockingly grotesque from the point of view of the dominant society, since she is exceedingly interested in heterosexual polygamy and in satisfying her boyfriends with oral sex. Like Joan, whom she believes to be her sister, she feels the attraction of the grotesque. When she visits Joan in her private room at night, she reads aloud from their favourite book, the Biblical Song of Solomon,

which contains the voices of two lovers and grotesque female body imagery. In an article on the Song's body imagery, Fiona Black states that Biblical interpreters used to read the Song of Songs allegorically. She says that modern scholarship, by contrast, focuses on the Song's "literal' (erotic) content," which readers may experience as unsettling (306). The woman's hair is, for instance, described as "a flock of goats," a hybrid of various elements. Marcia also uses the Song's amatory discourse in describing Joan's hair as "a flock of angels" (*Mister Sandman* 126). The Song's grotesque imagery makes Marcia laugh. Yet "despite her laughter, she is deadly serious. These are the words of God. More than that, they are weapons" (125). To Marcia, the clash of incompatibles is confusing. She uses the term *weapon* in describing the shocking effect of the grotesque, as does Philip Thomson, who writes, "Because of the characteristic impact of the grotesque, the sudden shock which it causes, the grotesque is often used as an aggressive weapon" (58).

Sonja, Joan's biological mother, is another grotesque character from the point of view of dominant society. She knits compulsively and earns money by excessively clipping bobby pins on cards. Though she weighs 250 pounds in her twenties, she keeps stuffing herself with food. She knows that people look on her as a freak because of her obesity. Yet when Sonja watches her body in the mirror, she feels "no repulsion, no embarrassment"; she is "entirely in awe," as if perceiving a sublime object (171). She also says to Joan self-deprecatingly, "In my last life I was the lady on the flying trapeze!" (303), which may be a reference to Cleopatra, a classical beauty transformed into a grotesque "Chicken Woman" in Tod Browning's horror movie *Freaks*. Doris and Gordon, moreover, are aware that they are figures of deformity because of their sexual deviancy — which from the point of view of middle-class society is both depraved and disgusting.

Apart from the characters' perception of themselves and their awareness of society's dominant ideology, the reader's perception of the characters needs to be taken into consideration as well. The description of lower bodily functions, such as Gordon's constant erections and exaggerated lustfulness, creates in the reader a contradictory response of laughter and disgust. The detailed visualization of same-sex in (fantasized) scenes is clearly meant to arouse ambivalent, uneasy reactions in the reader. The spectacle may be viewed as laughable and pleasurable but also as repulsive and horrifying, going too far beyond the pale of

decency. Take, for instance, the scene between Gordon and Al Yours/Al Yothers, the giant mechanic, in which Gordon “cups the boy’s groin, his cool testicles. He moves down his body and sucks one testicle into his mouth” (106). Doris’s daydreams about the black nurse Cloris are as inordinate and grotesque as Gordon’s about tall gay white men. In one of her dreams, “Doris rolls her lips over Cloris’s labia, she makes her tongue as soft and fat and wet as Cloris’s labia, she nurses Cloris’s clitoris with more tenderness than she kissed her own sleeping babies” (213). The extravagant display of same-sex sexual fantasies and contact, however, also produces earthy humour, as when the black lesbian nurse Harmony La Londe writes a love letter to Doris — “I pine for your breasts like fattened geese. In reveries I taste your mango honey” (69) — or in Gordon’s reflection about his erotic longing for Al Yours: “Who *can’t* see the cocks in his eyes is what Gordon would like to know” (142). Al, who is excessively interested in facts and quizzes, asks Gordon, “You know what I like about you?” whereupon Gordon answers, “I’m your drill master” (105). The humour of Gordon’s response is that it seems to refer both to their having had anal sex and to Al’s exorbitant desire for Gordon to quiz him on his encyclopedic knowledge. The same holds true for Harry Jolley, the neighbour who saved Gordon’s life during the latter’s heart attack. Harry’s ten-minute mouth-to-mouth resuscitation is described in terms of oral sex: “Blowing and blowing and blowing” (152).

For Joan, who is at home with what bourgeois society perceives as deviant, the normative, familiar everyday reality of human beings is strange. She appears to be utterly comfortable while observing “monstrous” aberrations. Gordon notices how “never in her face has he witnessed reproach or shock” (143). Joan’s knowledge of the others’ secrets is partially due to her telepathic power. She perceives their mental processes and is even capable of telepathically steering their (day)dreams, adding grotesque content of her own. Thus, Joan “brings” Doris a dream about her black lesbian lover, Harmony La Londe, who changes into a dolphin “but with legs, black legs” (31). She also “brings” Sonja a dream about her father’s lover, Al Yours/Al Yothers, in which Gordon has “green hammers for arms” (57). In both dreams, the unity of the body is destroyed and replaced by a hybrid creature. Marcia is the one with whom Joan constantly communicates telepathically; as a result, Marcia has a hard time distinguishing

between herself and Joan. Her constant reference to “we” is a form of doubling that is meant to produce an effect of the uncanny. In his essay on the uncanny, Freud’s comment on telepathy and the theme of the double casts a light on the relationship between Marcia and Joan. Freud writes, “This relation . . . is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own” (210).

The telepathy motif as well as Joan’s resemblance to an automaton and her function as a doppelgänger figure point toward Gowdy’s indebtedness to Hoffmann’s “Der Sandmann.” Freud writes that not only telepathy arouses in us a sense of the uncanny, but also the phenomenon of the double, apparent death and re-animation of the dead, the automaton or the wax-work figure, and the compulsion to repeat — all themes he recognized in Hoffmann. It should be mentioned that Freud’s understanding of Hoffmann’s tale is a controversial one, for many critics and theorists believe his interpretation of the fear of losing one’s eyes as a substitute for castration anxiety to be reductive. Sarah Kofman does not entirely do away with Freud’s interpretation of the eye motif, but emphasizes his strictly thematic approach to the uncanny and his neglect of the subject of perception (151). According to Horner and Zlosnik, this oversight results in a blindness to shifts in perspective and a polyphony of voices (47). As Freud only deals with the perspective of the protagonist, Nathaniel, he overlooks the clash of perspectives that creates uncertainty over what is real and what is imaginary.

In *Mister Sandman*, Gowdy presents a clash of perspectives in order to create doubt and intellectual uncertainty. She also parodically uses and abuses various gothic motifs from Hoffmann’s tale, of which the doppelgänger is a prominent one. Not only Joan, but also her biological father, Al Yours/Al Yothers, is a doppelgänger figure. Like Coppelius/Coppola in Hoffmann’s tale, he is said to be the Sandman. In “The Sandman,” the protagonist Nathaniel is terrified at the sight of the lawyer Coppelius, for he says, “Imagine a large, broad-shouldered man with a big misshapen head, an ochre-yellow face, grey bushy eyebrows from under which a pair of green cat’s eyes blaze out piercingly, and a large heavy nose drawn down over the upper lip” (89). In contrast to the Sandman Coppelius/Coppola, Al Yours/Al Yothers is not a vile monster that fills people’s soul with horror. In 1955, nine months before Joan’s birth, Gordon falls madly in love with the young mechanic, whom he

perceives as “an orange-haired giant” (*Mister Sandman* 32). Sonja, who was unwittingly impregnated by the gigantic Al Yothers a few hours before Al had sex with Gordon, says he is “a huge man with nostrils the size of quarters” (59) and with hands “the size of baseball gloves” (61). The grotesque Sandman in Gowdy’s novel is both feared and desired. He is an uncanny visitant within the host family who triggers off the release of repressed “monstrous” aberrations in the Canaries. His double name, Al Yours/Al Yothers, alludes to all yours and all you others, which means that, like Joan, he is the doppelgänger as the not-I-in-me who makes the invisible visible. He significantly tells Sonja, “You can call me yours” (60), and to Gordon, he says, “Daddy, I’m yours” (147). The narrator says that “the pleasure was all yours” (65) when the members of the Canary family enter Joan’s closet to reveal their “monstrous” desires. When Yothers decides to end his secret rendezvous with Gordon, he writes “AL WAS HERE” on the back of Gordon’s white shirt (115). With this message, the double reveals the satisfaction of Gordon’s “abominable” sexual desires. Little Marcia copies this obscure message on another shirt, but the letter *L* stamps out an *I* and “the message actually reads “ALI WAS HERE” (117). Someone, who later turns out to be Joan, seems to have intervened to put forward the relationship between Al Yours/Al Yothers and Joan/Alice Gunn as the others’ doppelgängers. Joan reads Yours’s message as “ALL WAS HERE,” which to her means “All was in the closet. All was there” (218).

In the figure of Joan as doppelgänger, Gowdy revises another character from Hoffmann’s dark Romantic tale, namely the automaton Olympia with whom Nathaniel falls desperately in love. Nathaniel’s brother wants him to realize that the daughter of Spalanzani is “quite uncanny” because she is “a wax-faced wooden doll” that is “only acting like a living creature” (“The Sandman” 116). This passage may have inspired Freud to say that a feeling of the uncanny is aroused by “doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate” (201). Kayser, in turn, relies on Freud when making the following link between the demonic grotesque and the feeling of uncanniness: “The mechanical object is alienated by being brought to life, the human being by being deprived of it. Among the most persistent motifs of the grotesque we find human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks” (183). Gowdy creates a similar uncertainty

with respect to the true nature of Joan Canary. Some people compare Joan, like Olympia, to a wax figure (*Mister Sandman* 92) and consider her to be “a cretin” (187). She shares Olympia’s stunning beauty and her ability to play the piano with great accomplishment (97). After Olympia plays the piano at a concert, Nathaniel is shocked by her hands being “icy cold; he felt a coldness as of death thrill through him” (“The Sandman” 113-14). Similarly, Joan’s hands are “ice cold” (*Mister Sandman* 187) as she gradually turns into a phantom while lying next to the corpse of Doris’s mother, Grandma Gayler, in a coffin with the lid closed.

This sinister event seems to be Joan’s message from the other side, inciting the Canarys to “take the lid off”: to stop burying their secrets. At the end of the novel, she repeats this terrifying experience and is taken to hospital. This second apparent death and re-animation conveys yet another mysterious message. It seems to be a call for a spiritual death-rebirth of the other family members because as soon as Marcia is back home, Joan communicates with her telepathically and Marcia “can sense the bad news gathering outside the shattering crystal of her unconsciousness, and some salvation being extended, like a voice calling ‘Here!’ or a rope dangling, but she is never quick enough” (292). While Joan is in hospital, the Canarys gather to listen to her tapes, which they believe contain recordings of her playing classical piano music. The “composition” (295), however, turns out to be anything but harmonious and sublime, as the listeners are unexpectedly confronted with each other’s secrets.

Joan finally discloses her uncanny knowledge, echoing the unsaid and unseen on the other side of reality’s appearance, by confronting her loved ones with their distorted voices on her tapes. At this turning point in the narrative, she is still not perceived as a disturber of familial harmony, even though the remarkable disclosure of the others’ forbidden desires is quite unsettling. Joan’s revelation of shameful secrets and memories will result in a terrifying disruption of identity for the others. Nevertheless, Joan is not experienced as an unknown evil force that invades the secure sphere of the home. She is deeply loved by everyone, and she ultimately functions as a welcome catalyst that challenges conventional ideas and gender roles. Joan’s function as a catalyst for change becomes obvious in the creation of her grotesque taped text.

The Grotesque as a Strategy of Subversion in *Mister Sandman*

The novel self-reflexively establishes an uncanny analogy between Gowdy, as the author of the grotesque narrative *Mister Sandman*, and Joan, as the editor of tapes. The tapes contain the recorded voices of the other family members that came out when they crossed the threshold of Joan's dark closet. Both Joan's and Gowdy's disharmonious and provocative texts resemble a grotesque body. While listening to Joan's mechanical text, Doris gradually realizes that they are "all in it" (298), and Gordon guesses at its emotional "shock value" which "brings the piece to a climax" (308). The tapes divulge the characters' desires that came out of the closet, though their utterances are presented in a disorderly, distorted form. Joan's disturbing composition indeed contains a mishmash of the other family members' spoken or unspoken words and sentences taken out of context. All the family's dark secrets are unexpectedly brought to light: Marcia's "I have slept with so many boys I have lost count" (302), Doris's "I love to have sex with bare-naked women" (306), Gordon's "I have orgasms with queer men" (307), and Sonja's "Always remember, bunny, I'm your real mother" (308). Furthermore, the tapes reveal a bizarre juxtaposition of words, some of which are "startling" (299). For instance, the words "*blowing doughnut jerking kiddo*" (305) are utterances that occur in such disparate contexts as Mr. Jolley "blowing" Gordon (153); Sonja's boyfriend being "a doughnut glazer" (143); a minister from the Presbyterian church "jerking" Gordon (154), and Sonja's boyfriend calling her "Kiddo" (163). Joan's incongruous combination of words and sentences echoes the "voices of all her darlings" (229), Al Yothers (Mister Sandman) included, for Joan is the composer who hums Pat Ballard's "Mister Sandman" in the background. Ironically, instead of being put to sleep, all Joan's and Gowdy's "darlings" are awakened to a shocking reality.

The terms Gordon uses in commenting on Joan's modified combination of the others' utterances are related to the strategy of the grotesque: "This is extraordinary," he says as he turns the tapes over. "Disquieting in places, there's no question about that. But once you accept that her intention is to provoke, there are levels within levels —" (304). In speaking about the taped text as "disquieting," Gordon refers both to its uncanny and grotesque effect. The text intends to provoke or shock, in that the familiar "forbidden" words and phrases, which Joan transformed by putting them in an alien context, turn out to be strangely

familiar. Likewise, Thomson describes the grotesque as an aesthetic phenomenon that breaks down and restructures a familiar reality. His claim that it functions as a Brechtian alienation or defamiliarization effect casts light on the key aspect of Joan's and Gowdy's grotesque texts:

The shock-effect of the grotesque may also be used to bewilder and disorient, to bring the reader up short, jolt him out of his accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective This effect of the grotesque can best be summed up as *alienation*. Something which is familiar and trusted is suddenly made strange and disturbing. Much of this has to do with the fundamental conflict-character of the grotesque, with the mixture of incompatibles characteristic of it. (58-59)

Like Joan's "dissonant collage" (*Mister Sandman* 250), Gowdy's unconventional narrative offers a grotesque mixture of amusing and repellent and therefore disorienting voices that cause an unsettling state of confusion in the recipients because both texts conflict with cultural norms. Gowdy's and Joan's texts are characterized by a conflation of heterogeneous elements and techniques of distortion that evoke mixed feelings of laughter and disgust in the reader/listener. The exact meaning of the texts is as indeterminable as the category of the grotesque itself.

The novel not only establishes a resemblance between Gowdy's and Joan's creative and subversive artistic products. There is also a similarity between Joan, who never shows "reproach or shock" (143) regarding her loved ones, and the perspective of the anonymous omniscient narrator. The latter, Gowdy's narrative "medium," takes a similar stance toward the characters in that he/she does not denounce their grotesque behaviour and speech. Joan possesses knowledge about the secrets of the other characters, thanks to their visits to the closet; moreover, as noted above, she is endowed with the power to communicate telepathically. The third-person omniscient narrator shares Joan's telepathic power in being able to read the minds of the characters. Nicholas Royle uses the relevant term "narrative telepathy" in speaking about narrative omniscience: "There is uncanny knowledge. Someone is telling us what someone else is thinking, feeling or perceiving" (256). The impersonal narrator in *Mister Sandman* indeed gives readers privileged access to the secret lives and aberrant desires of Gordon, Doris, Sonja, and Marcy. This results in dramatic irony, as the readers know far more

about the characters than they know about each other. The knowledge of the characters' secrets that the readers already possess is presented to them in a strangely familiar way while they read the content of Joan's tapes. To the ignorant characters, the others' transgressive desire that the tapes bring to light is uncanny and utterly disturbing. They initially respond with fear and defensive, nervous laughter to Joan's grotesque text. Their ultimate reaction, however, is one of release from the terrors of the grotesque — that is, from sheer disgust — and they seem to share a sense of liberation.

Joan as a catalyst for change manages to open the way to transformation in the lives of the Canarys. Their confrontation with Joan's grotesque permutation of familiar reality results in the awareness that the conventional roles played by each family member are relative and open to revision. In a similar vein, the grotesque is an aesthetic category with a transformative and creative potential. Harpham describes this subversive strategy of the grotesque as follows: "the grotesque implies discovery, and disorder is the price one always pays for the enlargement of the mind" (191). Fuß in turn says that the primary function of the grotesque is the radical destabilizing of common perception and cultural dichotomies (308).

Unlike Hoffmann's "The Sandman," Gowdy's novel does not end with the destruction of the monstrous and a sentimentalized image of "normality," or the restoration of middle-class propriety. Instead, the characters' previously marginalized otherness is accepted, alternative ways of being are accommodated, and the violation of societal norms is celebrated. As Mary Russo insists in her book on the risk of transgression and the grotesque: "the grotesque . . . is only recognizable in relation to a norm and . . . exceeding the norm involves serious risk . . . risk is not a bad thing to be avoided, but rather, a condition of possibility produced, in effect, by the normalization of the body across disciplines in the modern era" (10-11). When something that used to be perceived as monstrous is turned to a creative purpose, as is the case in *Mister Sandman*, it is because, in Horner's and Zlosnik's view, "parody can offer Gothic a comic turn. This turn frequently allows a fresh perspective on a changing world, one of accommodation rather than terrified apprehension" (12). *Mister Sandman*, for instance, ironically inverts the gothic theme of paternal authority. Fred Botting points out that the key figure in gothic fiction is the father who proclaims the law, as

a result of which “the usual subject of gothic fiction can be defined as the transgression of the paternal metaphor” (282). In Gowdy’s novel, all the characters, including Gordon, who is said to be a benevolent “family man” and the so-called “cornerstone of civilization” (40), transgress the boundaries of paternal morality and yet are not punished for it. The narrator’s overall sympathetic attitude toward the quirks of the loving comic characters and, for the most part, the lightness of tone and everyday speech certainly contribute to the reader’s shared sympathy for the “monstrous” Canarys. As noted above, sympathy for sexual and gender deviancy is a prominent feature of the new “Gothic-Carnavalesque.”

Gowdy’s novel ends with the narrator’s description of the entire Canary family tossing a ball to each other in the garden after midnight. The scene that readers are invited to look on hovers between the real and imaginary, or being and seeming. Its exact significance is left undecided, for the narrator says, “They could be people passing buckets of water to put out a fire. They could be a family spending a day at the beach together. If they were on a beach. If it was a day” (325). It remains uncertain whether this is a true domestic circle suggesting real familial harmony and happiness. The scene may convey the family’s embrace, in 1974, of difference and the celebration of new possibilities: freedom from conventional mores and from the strain of struggles for normalcy. This newly discovered freedom would make the world in which the “weird” Canarys live uncertain, yet perhaps more bearable. Whatever the nightly spectacle may mean to the reader, the ending obviously reiterates the theme that pervades the entire narrative: the problem of perception or the inability to establish the truth about reality and the uncanny effect that is generated by strange sights and revelations.

NOTES

¹ For instance, when *Helpless* was aired on BBC Radio 4’s “Book at Bedtime” in 2008, some listeners were upset by Gowdy’s portrayal of the pedophile’s transgressive impulses.

² For consistency, the term *gothic* when used as an adjective has been written with a lower-case *g*. When used as a noun, the term has been capitalized.

³ *Mister Sandman* has surprisingly received little attention from literary critics, although the novel was nominated for the 1995 Governor-General’s Award for Fiction, the 1995 Giller Prize, and the 1996 Trillium Award.

⁴ In her article on *We So Seldom Look on Love*, Maria Lerena primarily argues that the grotesque form is typical of the short story genre. Even though some critics have pointed out Gowdy’s regular reliance on the grotesque, Lee Parpart fails to use the term in his

comparative analysis of the title story from the short story collection and its film adaptation. Nathalie Wilson uses the term *abject* instead of *grotesque* in her brief discussion of *Mister Sandman*.

⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains the term *homosexual panic* as “the panicky response to a blackmailability over homo/heterosexual definition that affects all *but* homosexual-identified men” (240).

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