A Peculiar Approach to Death: The Work of Edward Gorey

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A PECULIAR APPROACH TO DEATH: 
THE WORK OF EDWARD GOREY

A parody of the institution of death in *The Hapless Child*

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PART 1

I. Introduction

I inherited a curiosity about death. My grandmother scoured graveyards throughout New England, fascinated with finding intricately carved Victorian gravestones especially, as an Emily Dickinson scholar, those of notable literary figures. My mother, in a similar vein, used to take my brother and me to graveyards across Cape Cod to go grave rubbing. We would load up her silver Toyota with rice paper and crayons, then head out to a new graveyard; the older the better. We’d spend the afternoon wandering, looking for graves that struck us. I always looked for graves bearing my name, while my brother looked for his birthday in the dates splayed across the top of the stones. My mother found one grave with both of our names (Lydia and Nathaniel) and made a beautiful rubbing that she framed. She hung it over a low, spooky-looking cupboard, as if suggesting that the alleged bodies lie just below.

For my family, death was bizarre and intriguing—fashionable, even. It was present in the art on our walls, my great-grandmother’s black mourning gown, and the black, beady-eyed crows my mom hides in high corners around her apartment. For a literary bunch, death was most evident in the books my family read: Joan Didion, Sylvia Plath, Edgar Allen Poe, Lemony Snicket. In encouraging interaction with death, the topic was made light. Morbidity began to take shape as something dimensional that had room for provocation and question—even humor. Death wasn’t so scary.

My mom had a framed postcard in the guest bathroom from an old boyfriend. I was always curious about it as the image on the front was so bizarre—also partly because it was the sole remnant of my mother’s romantic life before my father, a concept
so foreign to me. It was a simple black and white pen illustration of a little girl falling down the stairs. The caption underneath read, “A is for AMY who fell down the stairs.”

I later discovered that we had an abecedarian on the bookshelf with more images like these called *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*. This was my first introduction to Edward Gorey.

Because of a staunch disdain for animal stories and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, as a child Gorey’s works appealed to me. Like my family, Gorey was dark and funny. His books had bizarre creatures, fabulous Victorian outfits, and unfamiliar words. Upon learning of my fondness for the author, my mother encouraged our unorthodox relationship. She bought a large collection of his work and took me to visit his home in Cape Cod. Soon, Gorey became a fixture in my life, his work permeating beyond the confines of the page.

When I showed friends my Gorey collection, many of them were confused. They found his illustrations dark, his content eerie, and his words jumbled; worst of all, they thought I was weird. Imagine!

The intersection between humor and death in Gorey’s work fascinates me. I’ve written a brief paper on the matter before (in comparison to Leonard Baskin’s portraits *Raptors*) and found the topic rich with compelling ideas. Now, I want to write more.

As a child, I simply associated Gorey with my family and various other interactions; now, as a mature critic, I began to wonder if Gorey enables us to find humor in death. The purpose of this study is to explore and perhaps understand Gorey’s peculiarly humorous approach to death. What techniques does he use? How does his nonsense writing contribute to his death commentary? What is his unique understanding

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of death? How does he want his readers to feel? By immersing myself into Gorey’s world, I will gather an understanding of how he effectively produces humor from death, enabling me to better understand the complicated intention and brilliant mind of Gorey, and gain insight into his fundamental intention.

II. Gorey Background

Edward Gorey was an eccentric man. He was physically striking; he stood well over six feet and maintained a large white beard. He had a fondness for wearing large fur coats paired with white tennis sneakers while decked out in rings and necklaces. He was amiable yet guarded, grandiloquent when speaking, and incredibly well read.²

Gorey was reluctant to give interviews, but did so often, engaging interviewers in meaningful—and oftentimes, lengthy—conversation that would cover anything from art and soap operas to cats. Gorey’s interests were extensive; a critic said that Gorey’s inspirations ranged from “the highest of high art and the most popular of popular culture.”³ He was the most elegant of enigmas.

Gorey was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1925. He was a precocious child, completing his first drawing, The Sausage Train, at 18 months, and teaching himself to read by age three. In 1946, he entered Harvard University after a brief and uneventful period as a soldier in the U.S. Army. While at Harvard, Gorey developed his artwork and studied French. He met many creative friends, and even roomed with fellow writer Frank O’Hara. O’Hara and Gorey had a productive relationship, exchanging opinions on their

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³ Ibid
work and exposing each other to creative forces. Brad Gooch, author of the Frank O’Hara biography City Poet comments on the nature of the artists’ unique relationship, stating, “Before he met Gorey, O’Hara was a pretty earnest kid, but Gorey had this nonsensical style that came from his Anglophilia, from the English books that he read. So that kind of Brideshead Revisited sensibility was what Gorey conveyed to O’Hara.” The relationship between the two continued until O’Hara’s death in 1966.

In the early 1950’s, Gorey joined some fellow Harvard alums in the conception and creation of the Poets’ Theater in Cambridge. The group included a number of notable writers and poets: Adrienne Rich, Alison Lurie, John Hawkes, George Plimpton, and others. In this atmosphere of “heady art- and self-infatuat[ion],” Gorey immersed himself in theater, designing sets, writing scripts, and directing scenes.

In 1952, Gorey moved to New York where he accepted a job producing cover art for the publisher Doubleday. His work was featured in a variety of novels including works by Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf, and H.G. Wells. While Gorey accepted the position with Doubleday purely for financial motivations, his time there helped develop his personal style as he experimented with color and technique. He kept up with his own work while illustrating, eventually publishing his first independent work The Unstrung Harp (1953). He followed shortly with the publication of his best-selling book, The Curious Sofa (1961).

While in New York, Gorey was introduced to what was to be one of his greatest inspirations: The New York City Ballet. Over time, his attendance became more frequent,

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5 Ibid
and Gorey became a devoted fan of choreographer George Balanchine. Never missing a performance. Gorey’s evenings at the ballet inspired two of his best books: The Gilded Bat and The Lavender Leotard. Gorey has expressed his admiration for Balanchine, stating, “Balanchine is my life now. Just the fact of Balanchine’s being here dictates so much of my existence. I’m sure I would have left New York years ago if it weren’t for the New York City Ballet.”

Gorey’s love for the theater extended into a more personal milieu, and he was invited to produce the set and costumes for Frank Lagella’s Broadway production of Dracula.

Ultimately, even the allure of his beloved ballet was not enough to keep Gorey in New York. In 1979, Gorey began to spend more of the year in Barnstable, MA. Gorey had first visited Cape Cod in summer of 1948 and decided to live there for part of the year. Gorey enjoyed the reticence and peace he could maintain on the Cape, stating, “Here, if I get out the door, I get right back in. I have no social life down here at all, except in the summer, when all my relatives are here, and I do the cooking.” Gorey’s reclusive nature on the Cape—very Dickinsonian—provided him with the productive environment in which he made some of his most successful works. He became more involved with theater, writing, designing, and directing puppet shows on the Cape and Nantucket. His works became local hits, and he formed a theater ensemble known as Le Theatricule Stoique; original productions included “The Helpless Doorknob,” “The Gilded Bat,” and “Porptiga.”

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Edward Gorey died in April 2000 on Cape Cod leaving behind several unfinished works and thousands of collected books. Through a grant from the Highland Street Foundation, Gorey’s house was transformed into a museum--The Edward Gorey House--containing the artist’s works and personal items. The House also celebrates Gorey’s legacy, which has established a unique niche in children’s literature. Karen Wilkin, a Gorey expert, in her book *Elegant Enigmas: The Art of Edward Gorey*, writes, “He is something far more complicated and interesting: a true American original whose work, at once wholly his own and informed by a wealth of often unexpected sources, refuses to be classified.”

III. Gorey’s Literary Approach

Gorey was a voracious reader; his work in the *Poet's Theater* in Cambridge in the early 1950s was the first demonstration of his serious interest in writing. He worked alongside notable writers in the program, collaborating and experimenting with a variety of writing styles. Gorey's first paid work producing cover art for Doubleday also exposed him to many literary genres and required him to stay an active reader. Although Gorey's first writerly experiences had him editing works by Adrienne Rich, sharing a room with Frank O'Hara, and reading extensive volumes of Dickens, the inspirations that truly shaped his writing came from all sorts of places. Karen Wilkin explains, “He was passionate and well informed about nineteenth-century literature and television soap

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operas, the choreography of George Balanchine and mass market movies, cats and silent films, the Japanese novel and arcane illustrators, and much, much more."  

His preferred author was Agatha Christie who wrote in his favorite genre: "sinister-slash-cozy." Christie’s preferred mystery style has manifested in several of Gorey’s works, evident especially in his animations for the PBS series Mysteries! However, Gorey’s influences always loosely shaped his artistic process; the products of his work were not derived from some particular piece, but rather, as Wilkin puts it, “a process of free association.” While Gorey definitely drew from specific influences, he produced successful work with his individual flair.

Considering his use of language and style, Gorey is often regarded as part of the Gothic genre. The Gothic literary genre first exploded in 1790 in Britain and spread to the U.S., gathering a primarily female readership. The Gothic was a compilation of many popular styles—post-Renaissance, the supernatural, and eventually the Victorian—that resulted in a conflation of genres that was malleable and, more importantly, relevant to many different types of readers over an extended period of time. Gothic literature was excessive and romantic and easily satirized for its melodrama, which rendered the genre easily to film and theater adaptations.

A notable part of the Gothic genre is the antiquated and haunting qualities it acquires. In The Gothic in Western Culture, Jerrold Hogle states:

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15 Ibid
16 Ibid
…a Gothic tale usually takes place (at least some of the time) in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space—be it a castle, a foreign place, an abbey, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt…Within this space, or a combination of such spaces, are hidden some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story.\textsuperscript{17}

Gorey clearly works within this terrorizing sentimentality, producing works in which murderers, dying characters, and ghosts are pervasive. This haunting phenomenon recognizes more than just the genre’s incorporation of the supernatural; it also reflects the social practices that it seeks to demonize through artistic adaptation. The Victorian era, during which the Gothic reached full flower, was plagued with anxiety—Christianity was in crisis, women severely marginalized, and conflicting political ideologies were raised.\textsuperscript{18} Hogle states, “The hyperbolic unreality, even surreality, of Gothic fiction, as subject to parody and critique as it has been, is in every way essential to its capacity to abject cultural and psychological contradictions for modern readers to face or avoid.”\textsuperscript{19} Thus, the Gothic does more than produce hyperbolic, scary literature. Rather, it is a cultural movement that allows for constructive commentary through its excessive nature.

Gorey was a fan of the Gothic genre for his choice of literature, too. Gorey's favorite writers—Charles Dickens, Ann Radcliffe--inspired him play off of the melodramatic, spooky atmosphere that they so successfully conjured.\textsuperscript{20} Gorey, however, reworked the genre to create works that played off of it, eventually generating something


new. Gorey stated, “I think of my books as Victorian novels all scrunched up.”  

21 Gorey takes advantage of Gothic qualities in order to add a comic nature to his work--he manipulates the hyperbolic qualities of the Gothic vernacular language to create parody, adding a subversive nature to his literary style. Thus, while Gorey still produces within the genre, he pushes the satirical qualities of the Gothic to produce mocking comedy.

Gorey's work maintains a light, playful attitude--a quality that has led to the classification of many of his books as children's literature. However, stylistically, many consider his writing to be a part of the nonsense tradition. In an interview with Gorey, journalist Stephen Schiff states, “His books aren’t in the gothic tradition, he insists; he’s not telling horror stories; he’s not out to scare. What he’s up to has more to do with nonsense, with Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear.”  

22 While Gorey's jumbled wording, silly phrases, and lack of plot--plot, Gorey believed, was the "underpinning of everything else"--can make his works seem bizarre and random, when carefully analyzed, many of these practices are actually purposeful.  

23 Karen Wilkin describes how “Gorey’s deployment of ellipsis and non sequitur can create dreamlike sequences in which logic seems elastic. He can force you to create your own connections, even to complete the narrative for yourself.”  

24 Gorey thus requires an active readership, perhaps explaining why so many find his books compelling.

An imaginative reader is clearly important to Gorey; he says, "Whereas fantasy seems to be totally arbitrary at its worst...But [what I’m doing] always seems quite

24 Ibid 21
meaningful at the time.” Gorey's use of nonsense language is purposeful; it allows him actually to bring sense into his writing by allowing the reader to be creative, rather than simply depicting an obvious story. For example, in *The Epileptic Bicycle*, Gorey recounts that tale of two siblings, Embley and Yewbert. The plot of the book is random, and Gorey jumps directly from chapter one, to chapter seven, and to chapter eleven over a matter of pages. Gorey’s approach requires the reader to fill in the holes of logic and plot. As a result, the reader is more occupied with trying to understand the text, engaging their creative minds as they read.

In his writing, Gorey creates a world that is detached from reality or place. He never establishes a specific location or year for his books, and oftentimes leaves his characters nameless. The result of this is a more truthful story, where the reader is required to interact with the text--filling holes and making connections--rather than exist in a specific time and feeling conjured by a writer. Stephen Schiff continues:

> His victims are too vacuous to inspire pity and terror, and his tone is too cool to make you wring your hands. The only recourse is to laugh, and you do…For Gorey, existential dread isn’t the subtext, it’s the punch line. The books are as appallingly funny as if they were parody, but they’re not parody, exactly, because in some way they also seem absolutely true; their chill is authentic. As Gorey has said, only half in jest, ‘I write about everyday life.’

Gorey's invented world is not necessarily fully Gothic or fully nonsense. Gorey uses techniques from both genres, in addition to a skilful application of humor, to produce an interactive story that is entertaining to the reader. Although the reader is first captivated

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by Gorey’s work through its bizarre, entertaining and colorful nature, it provides insight into human nature when approached on a deeper level.

IV. Gorey’s Illustrative Style

Gorey uses Victorian style as his aesthetic of choice in illustrating. The Victorian era took place throughout the 19th Century, coming to a crescendo under the reign of Queen Victoria, the country’s beloved figure, from 1837-1901.\(^ {29}\) The period was also marked by rapid growth in industries such as engineering, architecture, art and photography, as well as an increased religious fervor and intellectual growth.\(^ {30}\) However, the period was marked with a sense of sentimentality, a practice encouraged especially by Queen Victoria, the era’s trendsetter, who was “fascinated by the past…and medieval ethnic tradition.”\(^ {31}\) After her husband, Prince Albert, died in 1861, Queen Victoria entered into seclusion and dressed in black for the rest of her reign.\(^ {32}\) This event also had national ramifications, encouraging the Victorian theme of sentimentality as the entire nation entered into a period of mourning for the death of the well-loved Prince.\(^ {33}\)

As a result of the nation’s grief and reversionary interests, Victorians had a increased awareness of the supernatural. There was a strong desire to connect with departed family and friends through séances or spiritual photography. This obsession was yet another manifestation of social anxiety as people expressed their concerns with unknowing about the afterlife. Although the results of their efforts sometimes blurred the

\(^{30}\) Ibid 25.
\(^{31}\) Ibid 13
\(^{33}\) Ibid
lines between spiritualism and entertainment, this practice added to the death focus of the era, fostering a cultural movement that was heavy with events from the past.34

The sentimentality of the Victorian era manifested itself especially in the domestic sphere as a stratified and ritualistic society emerged.35 Social events were highly choreographed, and there were extensive expectations regarding hospitality and manners.36 Not only were adults given instruction of how to behave, but also children. The Victorian child was expected to possess a multitude of qualities to fit with the era’s romantic notions regarding youth. In *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood*, Judith Plotz analyzes a personal letter from 1870 that can help to better understand the era’s ideas regarding children; she writes:

> The elements in this encounter play out the Victorian Child Romance featuring a country child who is at once uncannily beautiful (‘bewitching’) and pathetically vulnerable (‘tiny light,’ ‘little delicate,’ ‘poor child’)…An isolated and vulnerable girl, this ‘little friend’ is Kilvert’s object of desire both for her pure loveliness and for her distress.37

This multitude of characteristics convalesces in the Victorian Cult of the Child, a Victorian attitude that expects children to be ethereal, helpless beings.38 This culture also maintains a haunted spirit as children were seen as otherworldly, supernatural characters within Victorian society.

> Within the Victorian social model, elaborate expectations of style and tradition developed that exposed the tension between innovation and sentimentality, largely manifesting in the style of the Victorian home.39 Heirlooms and antiques were considered

36 Ibid
38 Ibid 254
fashionable, while those who exhibited bad taste exposed their superficiality and vulgarity as they fell for the “shiny newness of furniture.” The era called for the preservation of the “old home” in which the nation’s moral agenda is abided by and practiced.\footnote{Ibid 55}

Although the Victorian era stifled certain stylistic choices through an almost mandated aesthetic, the period did allow room for certain individual expression. As the fashions called for mourning apparel following Prince Albert’s death, Victorians applied their intricate taste to the bland requisite uniform in the form of ostentatious accessories, increasing demand on the mining industry as people sought ornate jewelry.\footnote{Robin Gilmour, The Victorian Period (London, U.K.: Longman Group UK Limited, 1993), 57.} There was a general reversion to medieval craftsmanship, driving decorative industries to new heights as people wanted to fill their homes with rococo chairs, stained glass, and tapestries.\footnote{Ibid 56} The Victorian aesthetic was thus an overindulgent, extravagant spin on the past, a sentimental movement that encouraged grandeur and expression within the confines of an intensely governed society.

Just as Victorians reverted to the medieval, Gorey brought the Victorian aesthetic to the 1960s. The Victorian style was suitable to his work, as it is excessive and ornate, easy to parody with Gorey’s hyperbolic, creative approach. Gorey credits his interest in the Victorian aesthetic to visual inspirations and literature from the era; he states:

The whole genre of nineteenth century book illustration—steel and wood engravings—holds a fascination for me. There’s something in that technique that appealed to me strongly. I’d pore over these books and of course everyone in them was in period costume. I do think period costume is more interesting to draw. My stuff is seldom very accurate Victorian or Edwardian of course. And at times I have little deviations into the Twenties.\footnote{Ibid}
I have, occasionally, drawn contemporary stuff, but I wouldn’t do it on my own work, simply because my ideas don’t lend themselves to contemporary life.\textsuperscript{44}

While Gorey’s works are neither historically accurate nor modern interpretations of the Victorian, he adopts the era’s highly stylized aesthetic approach. His use of the nineteenth-century is more than just to produce a certain look—he says, “…because I am not dealing with surface reality, I find the clothes, the décor, and everything of that period more visual.”\textsuperscript{45} Gorey uses the Victorian aesthetic to recreate the feel of the era: sentimentality, mourning, excess. The era was filled with spooky manifestations of the past reawakening in the present—an almost ghostly sensation. The Gothic aesthetic that resulted from this—ornate buildings, dark clothing, heavy tapestries—is one that fits perfectly into Gorey’s haunted literary world.

In addition to being visually appealing, the Victorian aesthetic also fits with Gorey’s Gothic literary style. Just as with the Gothic, the excessive nature of Victorian style lends itself well to mockery. The ostentatious aesthetic can be easily pushed to the realm of ridiculous, as evident in Gorey’s use of costuming and setting. Additionally, the Victorian aesthetic plays upon the same anxieties as the Gothic. Both induce a reversion to the past as a response to the social and political anxieties of the time that manifest in eerie, nostalgic sensations.

Gorey employs both the Gothic and Victoria aesthetic as effective techniques to express his fascination with death. Both possesses a sentimentality and morbid focus that lend well to Gorey’s illustrative tone, and the movements are easily mocked, which


allows Gorey’s humor to be apparent. Thus, Gorey’s voice is best expressed through the methods of the Gothic genre and Victorian aesthetic as they come closest to his immediate intention as artist.

V. Gorey and Bakhtin’s Carnival

During World War II, Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin submitted his dissertation on French Renaissance writer Francois Rabelais. In his work *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin discusses the principle of the carnival and the grotesque, two overarching themes that rule Bakhtin’s theory. In the carnival, powerful institutions that rule society are undermined, and participants revel in the new freedom they’re afforded. From this liberty, grotesque imagery—a world in between reality and the imaginary (the carnival)—is produced in the form of odd creatures and fantastic designs.46 The grotesque is humorous, light and subversive to the once powerful hegemony that determines culture and behavior. Therefore, Bakhtin’s beliefs can be used as an approach for literary analysis, especially when looking at works that incorporate parody and mockery.

Bakhtin’s work examines the relationship between the carnival and subsequent literary interpretation. His concept of grotesque imagery shares similarities with the Gothic and nonsense language through their celebration of the bizarre. Edward Gorey’s work also conjures a carnival through his subversion of the institution of death. Through application of Bakhtin’s theory, we can better understand Edward Gorey’s artistic and literary agenda by analyzing his use of parody.

Bakhtin begins by recognizing the culture of folk humor that was present in the Middle Ages. The popular folk festivities at the time—carnivals—produced a specific genre of humor that challenged everyday experiences. The universal spirit inherent in these carnivals was made available by the temporary suspension of hegemonic powers—i.e. the church, government, social institutions—that helped generate a playful, humorous energy. The laughter thus produced in the carnival was a “festive laughter.”47 The joyful spirit is not an individual response to an isolated event, but rather a “laughter of all the people.”48

In the activity of laughter that results from the temporary freedom of an encroaching hierarchy, Bakhtin suggests that there is a quality to the humor that is “ambivalent.”49 While the spirit is joyful and happy, laughter is also mocking, deriding. Bakhtin states, “it asserts and denies, buries and revives.”50 However, Bakhtin is careful to add that this mockery is not negative, individual, or hierarchical in nature; instead, it “expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it.”51

The spirit of the carnival produces an idyllic, utopian world where true democracy is practiced. This sensation is expressed visually in Bakhtin’s concept of grotesque imagery. He writes:

The material bodily principle in grotesque realism is offered in its all-popular festive and utopian aspect...In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private egotistic form, severed from other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all people.52

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48 Ibid
49 Ibid
51 Ibid
The grotesque imagery is produced in the universal quality of the carnival. As individuals enter into this joyful event collectively, rules are destroyed. The grotesque grows with our laughter as we mock enforcing institutions, reproducing our now unbridled sentiments through imagery that appeals to our immediate senses. In grotesque imagery, all that is abstract and spiritual manifests in behavior, interaction, artwork, writing, and more. This process is granted by the suspension of hierarchy, as hegemonic institutions that determine perspective no longer rule, e.g. church, government, universities. Bakhtin states, "Actually the grotesque liberates man from all forms of inhuman necessity that direct the prevailing concept of the world." In this spirit, for example, we are able to find the substance of what separates life and death. We can approach this relationship without the theories presented to us by the church or societal formalities and inhibitions surrounding the topic of death. Through the carnival, we can explore inherent tensions and unease, gaining deeper understanding into human nature.

However, in transitioning back between the carnival world and reality, Bakhtin states that the grotesque becomes fundamentally hostile and alien. When we return to ourselves—to reality—the carnival is over as we are no longer a part of the utopian event that supports the development of such bizarre imagery.

Gorey emerges here. Gorey’s work produces the same unease as expressed by Bakhtin; Gorey presents a world filled with the tension of the real versus the illusionary. In an interview discussing the intent of his work, Gorey states, “For some reason, my mission in life is to make everybody as uneasy as possible. I think that we should all be

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53 Ibid 49
as uneasy as possible, because that’s what the world is like.”

Gorey intentionally provokes the reader, encouraging them to interact with his work in a manner that is closer to reality than the fantasy most literature provides.

Gorey successfully creates a carnival spirit by parodying the hegemonic power of death, thereby suspending its power. The institution of death to which Gorey responds is largely based on the Victorian. The Victorian fascination with death produced repercussions that manifested in style, spirituality and social forms. Each of these structures decreed specific rules regarding approaches and attitudes towards the institution of death that were fiercely followed in efforts to remain fashionable.

Gorey celebrates the tension in death by presenting it to his readers in a way that is palatable—parodying the institution and expectations that are embedded within. Although the fundamental action in producing parody is often derision, Bakhtin argues that it is instead a joyful exchange: "This ornamental interplay [parody] reveal[s] an extreme lightness and freedom of artistic fancy, a gay, almost laughing, libertinage.”

Perhaps this is why Gorey is so enjoyable; he engages the reader in an environment that disregards social expectations. Now, the reader can respond organically and individually without enforced distractions.

Gorey depicts colorful grotesque imagery by taking advantage of the linguistic and artistic freedom afforded to him in the absence of hegemonic structure. In the carnival he produces, Gorey is no longer tethered to literary rules or expectations. He is now allowed to produce work that expresses his sentiments and those he believes to be

56 Ibid
57 Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 32.
inherent in everyone buried underneath the weight of institutions. Gorey’s work is not to be read as an extreme libertarian doctrine, but rather a reprise of the grotesque imagery that exists within us.

Gorey revels in literary practices that are usually discouraged. For example, many of Gorey’s works follow illogical sequences that are difficult to understand, especially with the addition of his nonsense language. He does not comply with expectations of clear, written delivery, but instead expresses his ideas in a rhythm that he prefers. Gorey also incorporates themes that could be considered controversial, especially in the context of children’s literature. He presents children dying frequently throughout his work, an arguably distasteful topic. He approaches death in a realistic way, without any illusion of formality.

Through the grotesque imagery presented in his work, Gorey is able to use parody to effectively confront readers with the ultimate reality: we all die. Gorey reminds us that neither we nor our children are safe from death. We cannot escape it by not talking about it with our friends, not reading it in our books, and not seeing it in our art. Gorey mocks our highly edited exposure to death by presenting it right before our eyes in the most blunt fashion. As a result, Gorey’s carnival engages us in a constructive rethinking of our relationship to death.

Gorey presents his approach through a reimagining of the Gothic—a genre Bakhtin dubs, "the new Grotesque."58 The Gothic inherently possesses subversive qualities; in Hogle’s essay, The Gothic in Western Culture, he writes:

…the longevity and power of Gothic fiction unquestionably stem from the way it helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and

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sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural, throughout the history of western culture since the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{59} Those sources of anxieties, Hogle surmises, stem from the “old ego-ideals of the Church.”\textsuperscript{60} The Gothic genre symbolizes and disguises these fears, reinterpreting them in such a way that “only extreme fictions of this kind can seem to resolve.”\textsuperscript{61} Hogle suggests that the genre presents these fears through abjection of unfamiliar manifestations.\textsuperscript{62} This process of abjection is similar to the creation of grotesque imagery by encouraging all types of people to turn their fears into physical representations. In the Gothic, the abjection is apparent in the genre’s proliferation of ghosts, graves, and haunted houses.

Gorey functions within the abjection supplied by the Gothic; however he also subverts the genre itself. He parodies the Gothic’s pious moments, especially those regarding death, working against the melodrama, romanticism and sentimentality the genre proposes. His approach is a modern take on the Gothic, which also demands him to provide commentary on contemporary notions of death as he combines them with those of the past. Although the reader experiences a destabilized connection with Gorey's work compared to what they believe death to be--here comes Gorey's so beloved sense of 

\textit{unease}--the reader also realizes something significant: Gorey is \textit{right}.

In the absence of hegemonic powers, Gorey points out that so many institutional traditions and cultures are absurd, especially those portrayed from the Gothic literature which he draws inspiration from, such as Ann Radcliffe and Charles Dickens. Bakhtin comments on the comic nature of the Gothic: "without the principle of laughter this genre

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid
\item Ibid
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\end{footnotesize}
would be impossible.” Gorey uncovers those aspects—for example, the flamboyance of the funeral or the use of a bizarre murder weapon—that make the genre so laughable. He presents these notions to the reader in a manner that is enjoyable through his suffusion of humor, thereby successfully defeating terror with laughter.

In his Introduction, Bakhtin discusses representations of the carnival in Renaissance literature:

In all these writings, in spite of their differences in character and tendency, the carnival-grotesque form exercises the same function: to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world from conventions and established truths, from cliches, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things.

Bakhtin's carnival allows for societal reevaluation free from hegemonic expectations and constructions. This liberation allows for new ideas and potentials sprung from the birth of the grotesque. However, when entering Gorey's carnival, we don't experience Bakhtin's proposed alienation between the grotesque and reality; instead, Gorey's work suggests that even reality itself is carnivalesque. We are part of many institutions that are ridiculous in nature. Gorey is so masterful because he points out the obvious in these customs to which we subscribe; he's blunt, but he's funny about it. Thus, Gorey explains the grotesque in death, using humor as a mechanism to relieve our unease as we face reality without the guidance of prevailing institutions.

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65 Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 34.
66 Ibid 49
PART 2

VI. Gorey in Art Historical Context

*The Hapless Child* (1961) is Gorey’s most popular work, and widely considered his best.\(^{67}\) While Gorey found success early in his career as he began to first self-publish in the early 1960s, his work was an anomaly compared to the art produced at the time: Pop Art.\(^{68}\) Pop Art emerged in New York City from artists like Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and Jasper Johns.\(^{69}\) The movement embraced post-WWII manufacturing and consumption, blurring the boundary between high and low-culture with the celebration of commonplace items.\(^{70}\) The artwork produced was visually immediate, a response to the Abstract Expressionism period just before, through techniques such as large scaling, bright colors, and identifiable objects.\(^{71}\)

Pop Art celebrated the mass-media approach of commercialization prevalent in the 1960s. Thus, the movement’s images could be organized in a comprehensive manner that mirrored structures of everyday life. In *Pop Art Redefined*, Suzi Gablik describes this system; she states, “...for the exhibition we have organized them into basic schema: household objects, images from the cinema, images found in the mass media (like comic strips and billboards), food (like hamburgers and Coca-Cola), and clothing.”\(^{72}\) Pop Art

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\(^{69}\) Ibid

\(^{70}\) Ibid


borrowed imagery from high and low culture art, blurring the lines in the hierarchy that more interpretive art had previously constructed.  

Pop Art sought to make art accessible by breaking down the disconnect between viewer and work. Now, not only those who had received the proper training could make art, nor were only those with refined intellectual ability able to interpret it. Under Pop Art, artwork was obvious, modern and relatable. In *Pop Art Redefined*, art critic Suzi Gablik uses Robert Rauschenberg’s multi-media theatre piece *Pelican* to explain the intentions of the movement; she writes:

> His performance works…to break down the barriers between art and actual experience. In all of Rauschenberg’s work, whether it is for the theatre or in painting, there is an absence of hierarchy of significant experience; that is to say, no particular experience is given priority or importance over another. His idea that ‘there is nothing that everything is subservient to’ has been one of the most seminal in contemporary art.

Rauschenberg’s approach affirms the defiant attitude of the Pop Art movement towards institutions that demand extensive knowledge or experience regarding art. In this subversive quality, Pop Art shares similarities with Bakhtin’s carnival.

Pop Art challenges the hegemonic power that mandates rules for the art world. No longer do successful artists need to spend years in art school or working under the tutelage of a genius, nor do art-lovers need to have an art history degree. Pop Art suggests that there is a creativity and unique value inherent in consumerism and even the lower-class. Through reinterpretation of commonplace items such as commercials, comics, and kitchen appliances, Pop Artists create a grotesque imagery in the absence of expectations.

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Furthermore, when we engage in the institutional defiance of Pop Art, we enter into a joyful carnival. We laugh as the very items we have in our kitchens (Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans*) or parked in our driveway (James Rosenquist’s *I Love You with My Ford*) are presented through canvas on the prestigious walls of the Guggenheim.⁷⁵ We revel in the universality of the moment and celebrate our newfound accessibility to art.

Clearly Gorey’s work does not look like those of pop artists, nor does he reference consumerism—or even modern themes, really. In an interview with Toby Tobias, Gorey says, “I have, occasionally, drawn contemporary stuff, but I wouldn’t do it on my own work, simply because my ideas don’t lend themselves to contemporary life.”⁷⁶ Gorey’s style references an aesthetic from the past, leaving him uninterested in current techniques. A few similar artists also ignored the modern conventions of the art world, Balthasar Balthus, for example, but Gorey was largely stylistically anachronistic to those contemporary to him.⁷⁷

However, Gorey shares similar qualities with the intention of Pop Art. For example, just like Pop Art, Gorey still references everyday sentiments in his work. In an interview with Lisa Solod discussing the intention of his work, Gorey says, “I know that my work does not seem to be about reality, but it *is*! God knows that day-to-day reality is certainly drab to the point of lunacy sometimes.”⁷⁸ Pop Art takes advantage of the pervasive commercialization of the time, taking the commonplace and manipulating it in a new way—into *art*. Similarly, Gorey takes our everyday feelings--fear, boredom,

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anxiety— and expresses it in his illustrations: for example, Neville’s death from ennui in *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, Donald’s nightmares in *The Epileptic Bicycle*. Both Gorey and Pop Art validate the feelings of the viewer as an insider by producing work that is relatable to them.

Additionally, both stylistically employ a bluntness that allows for increased accessibility. In Gorey’s work, this is manifested through stark black and white images and minimal, direct captioning. While Pop Art maintains a direct manner through bold colors and large pieces, these two techniques allow for quicker and, arguably, more significant connections to their productions.

The increased accessibility of artwork is similar to the development of the universal—and highly public—spirit in the carnival. Gorey’s carnival spirit is largely produced through a mockery of the Victorian era. He creates grotesque imagery that parodies the Victorians by satirizing their aesthetic and attitude. Gorey mocks the stuffiness and formality of the Victorian Era just as Pop Art sticks it to institutional artistic expectations.

Additionally, Gorey makes us realize that those sentimentalities developed in the Victorian era, specifically those regarding death, are still pervasive today. We are still expected to wear black to a funeral, to grieve at death, and to write letters of condolence. Like Pop Art, Gorey reminds us that our modern traditions and feelings are an important aspect to consider when effectively engaging with art.

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VII. Inspiration for The Hapless Child

Edward Gorey didn’t consider The Hapless Child (1961) to be particularly remarkable—he once called it “excessive”—however, it is arguably the most utterly Gorey-esque story he produced.81 The book is filled with classical Gorey devices: heavy shading, Victorian houses, bizarre characters, nonsense language, and the death of a child. Through Gorey’s technique of infusing a brooding atmosphere and sarcasm into his illustrations, The Hapless Child emerges as a skillful example of his intentions as an artist and serves as a text that lends well to careful analysis.

Gorey was an avid moviegoer, preferring early silent films to modern, which he considers “have gone too far.”82 Gorey based The Hapless Child on L’Enfant de Paris, a French 1913 silent film directed by Leonce Perret.83 L’Enfant de Paris recounts the fictional tale of a cherubic little girl who is suddenly orphaned when her father goes to war and her mother dies. The girl is sent to an orphanage complete with demonic teachers and cruel children, and finally escapes only to be kidnapped by crooks. The movie ends with a henchman feeling pity for the girl, and helping her to reunite with her father who has returned from war.84

While the basic plot of The Hapless Child is clearly derived from Perret’s film, Gorey takes it in another direction. In an interview discussing L’Enfant de Paris, Gorey says:

I know that the movie starts out exactly the way *The Hapless Child* does. *The Hapless Child* deviates quite early. But I’ve always been a passionate moviegoer. I’ve been very much influenced by old movies, and a lot of my books derive, in one way or another, from old movies. That one, I remember, quite impressed me; I can remember sitting in the dark and thinking, ‘Oh, what a zippy movie.’

*L’Enfant de Paris* lends itself well to Gorey’s work; the movie produces a heavy sense of sentimentality through its aesthetic and depiction of pre-wartime spirit. Additionally, the overacting portrayed in the movie and ridiculous nature of the transportability of the child produces a cinematic equivalent to the feeling expressed by Gorey’s illustrations. Both *L’Enfant de Paris* and *The Hapless Child* rely upon excessive characters, overblown situations and exaggerated realities.

However, unlike Perret, Gorey expresses these techniques as parody. He replicates exact scenes in *L’Enfant de Paris*, yet strips of them of emotional significance. The sentimentality of *L’Enfant de Paris*—father journeys off to war, little girl left parentless—is subdued, and instead only its implicit aesthetic remains in Gorey’s work through pre-colonial mansions, dark orphanage and brooding atmosphere. As a result, *The Hapless Child* is entirely descriptive; the narrative maintains no reflective or analytical qualities regarding the characters or sequence of events.

*L’Enfant de Paris* provides Gorey a framework from which to express his unique perspective on death. Utilizing classical tragic devices—the archetype of the orphan, evil teachers, dying children—Gorey parodies the system of death we subscribe to that manifest in the funerals we attend, the solemn post-mortem prayers we recite, and the reverence with which we approach the afterlife. Considering *The Hapless Child* as a lens,

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the story provides a variety of confrontations with mortality that serve as a platform to better understand Gorey’s unique and humorous understanding of the institution of death.

VIII. Catalogue of The Hapless Child

*The Hapless Child* by Edward Gorey was published in 1961 by Pomegranate Communications. The book is small, 7x7.6 inches, and was marketed as children’s literature. *The Hapless Child* features thirty of Gorey’s black and white pen-and-ink illustrations. The images were reproduced in publication to their original size, 4x5 inches. The following is a catalogue of all thirty illustrations:
This is the front cover of *The Hapless Child*, appearing a bit larger than the rest of the illustrations. The cover features the mirrored reflection of Charlotte Sophia, the protagonist, held up by two gargoyles. Two newts lie below, an image that repeats throughout the plot of the book.

We are first introduced to Charlotte Sophia in her home. She appears ghost-like with white dress and stockings, pale skin, and blonde hair. She is standing as if presented on stage, with two curtains pulled back behind her. Her home is lavish and in the Victorian style, evident through the detailed wallpaper, thick carpet, and heavily framed hanging pictures.
This illustration portrays Charlotte Sophia with her parents at tea time. They appear of kindly disposition; the father, draped in a heavy fur coat, offers his daughter a present while her mother, dressed fashionably, looks on and sips tea. The family appears happy and comfortable, evident through their décor and outfits. A small, dark creature peeks onto the scene from the bottom left window.

We enter into Charlotte Sophia’s bedroom, which is also lavishly decorated. The room is clearly that of a child, evident in the stacked books, stuffed dog and doll dresser. Charlotte Sophia sits on an ottoman and gazes lovingly at her doll, Hortense, as she dresses her. Hortense is dressed quite fashionably with a ribbed collar and elaborate hat.
This is the first image relaying distress in *The Hapless Child*. The illustration features Charlotte Sophia clutching her father, dressed in uniform. The girl looks anxious and sad, evident through her heavy eyes. Her mother is depicted in profile reaching for the arm of her husband. Again, we see a small creature just visible beyond the crack in the door. The animal is crawling, looking up onto the scene of the family.

Gorey illustrates a scene mid-action just as Charlotte Sophia’s mother learns her husband has died. She stares blankly forward, hands extended, and drops a letter (presumably the notification of death). Charlotte Sophia gazes inquisitively towards her stunned mother, clutching Hortense, and with her back to the reader. The creature reaches a tentacle-like part into the scene, rapping the ligament around the banister along the stairs.

*One day her father, a colonel in the army, was ordered to Africa.*

*Several months later he was reported killed in a native uprising.*
Charlotte Sophia’s mother is depicted lying in her four-poster bed next to a portrait of her husband, on the brink of death. Her hair is loose around her, eyes are hollow, and body is emaciated. She wears a flowing white gown, and extends her hands long. Charlotte Sophia, whose bulging vacant eyes are just visible over the bed, clutches her mother’s left hand. Gorey includes the creature from under the bed, almost hidden by the covers, watching the event ensue.

Gorey depicts Charlotte Sophia’s only surviving relative, an uncle, just as he suddenly is hit with a piece of falling masonry, an unfortunate event from which he subsequently dies. The uncle, dressed fashionably in large fur coat and top hat, is mid-step in front of a stone building and across from a fenced park featuring a nude sculpture. He drops his cane as a piece of stone falls angling towards the back of his head. The creature, now newt-like, is wrapped around a nearby stone.
Charlotte Sophia, now orphaned, is dressed in black mourning clothes. The brim of her hat covers most of her face, and she reverently folds her hands before her. She stands in the office of her family lawyer, which is full of thick volumes of books stacked along a tall bookcase. The lawyer gazes down over his thick mustache at her officiously. He is fat and bald, dressed neatly in a plaid suit. The tail of the creature, stuck under a stack of papers, reaches down from the right of the frame.

The lawyer escorts Charlotte Sophia to a boarding-school where a student meets her. The student is taller and older than Charlotte Sophia, and has large, hollow eyes, giving her a somewhat sickly quality. She is dressed in uniform, and holds open a large wooden door. Charlotte Sophia is still in mourning clothes, and holds Hortense—also dressed in black and with a veil over her face. The family lawyer stands stoically behind her in a plaid fur coat. The limb of the creature peeks out from the cold stone building.
Charlotte Sophia, still in all black, stands on a stool holding a huge book (well over half her size) over her head. The creature holds onto the front leg of the stool, and looks towards the reader. She looks uncomfortable and unhappy from her facial expression. Her teacher is turned away from Charlotte Sophia, and wears reflective glasses that shield her eyes—she looks evil or alien-like. The teacher smiles kindly to two other female students in uniform, who look at their teacher with reverence.

Charlotte Sophia stands in the school’s courtyard with her classmates as they rip Hortense apart. Charlotte Sophia, remarkably smaller than the other girls, stands with worried eyes and clasped hands. One student stands with hands on hips, blocking Charlotte Sophia. Two other girls—one with a particularly devilish look on her face—stand playfully with one arm of Hortense in each hand. Hortense’s right leg is left dismembered on the ground. The creature looks over the ledge of the surrounding stone wall.
Charlotte Sophia hides with her back along a wall outside of a classroom, looking forlorn. Beyond a glass panel, we see three students lined up in uniform. Gorey distinguishes Charlotte Sophia from her classmates through her physical location exterior to the rest of the students, as well as her smaller stature, blonde hair and mourning clothes. The creature remains in the classroom, dangling a limb down from a high shelf.

Charlotte Sophia lies weeping in her cot. Her room looks like one in a hospital: minimal articles, starched bedding, and white sheets along the sides for privacy. She looks pale and pathetic, hands clutching her blanket. Gorey’s creature appears to have grown substantially: two talons peek out from underneath a wall of sheets.

During the day Charlotte Sophia hid as much as possible.

At night she lay awake weeping and weeping.
Gorey portrays Charlotte Sophia in action as she escapes from school, unclear if she is dropping down from the school’s walls or climbing over. She wears a white nightgown and is barefoot. Cobblestones are below her. The darker shading on the page makes it appear nighttime. The creature is left on the other side of the wall, nestled in a crook of the tree.

When she could bear it no longer she fled from the school at dawn.

Charlotte Sophia lies in between the street and sidewalk. She is unconscious with bare limbs splayed from underneath her white nightgown. She lies underneath a brick building with a central stained glass window. Another building of similar material is nearby, giving the illustration an oppressive feel. The creature, now falcon-like, creeps around the side of the building and looks at Charlotte Sophia. It has a long neck and poised wings.

She soon lost consciousness and sank to the pavement.
An eerie man grabs the locket front around Charlotte Sophia’s limp neck, raising her up towards him. He wears a large black coat, a droopy hat that hides his face, and has a newspaper in his pocket. Charlotte Sophia still appears unconscious, her body leaning backwards as she is pulled by the man. The creature looks out from the window of the stained glass window towards the reader.

Gorey captures a man mid-action as he carries Charlotte Sophia’s limp body in his right arm, her only dangling feet visible to the reader. The man has a large handlebar moustache and wears a low brimmed hat from which he peeks out sheepishly. He walks towards an open wooden door, which leads to a dark alley. Beyond towards the end of the alley, we see the creature staring towards us.
The same man from the last illustration carries Charlotte Sophia’s unconscious body into a dismal room. The room is windowless, with cracked stone walls and piled rocks and sand on the floor; it is clearly an unsuitable place for children. A picture of a naked woman hangs on the wall, and three empty bottles are stacked along the wall. The creature, now small and ghost-shaped, presses out from within the bottle.

Charlotte Sophia, with eyes barely open as she awakens from her stupor, sits at a table with her captor and another man. The two men drink from a half-full bottle as they direct their bodies towards each other, engaged in conversation. The drunken brute wears checkered pants, low cut shirt, and slippers. He is bearded. Three more empty bottles are stacked to the right of the frame, and two torn sheets hang overhead. The creature is now a bat, flying into the illustration from behind a sheet.
The drunken brute faces Charlotte Sophia confrontationally, clutching an artificial rose and half-full bottle. Five more empty bottles are disposed on the ground. Charlotte Sophia stands barefoot on a stool with an artificial rose in hand. More materials lie in front of her on the table, and two ratty sheets hang overhead. Charlotte Sophia looks tired and sad, eyes hollowed. The creature crawls below, looking upwards towards her.

Charlotte Sophia leans forwards on a broken stool as she reaches for a drip of water from the sink with cup in hand. A newt-like figure wraps around the pipe connected to the sink. A plate with a few scraps sits below her as well as two empty bottles. A ripped poster reading “Paper Roses” hangs to her right, as well as another ripped sheet. The legs and feet of the drunken brute just peek into the frame as he reclines on the sofa; his left slipper sits on the ground while his right hangs loosely.

Charlotte Sophia was put to work making artificial flowers.

She lived on scraps and tap water.
Charlotte Sophia hides pitifully in the right corner, kneeling on a mat. She looks woefully at the brute, arms crossed in front of her. The brute covers his eyes with his right hand, and extends his left forward. He is mid-step with left food extended. His distended belly is revealed. A empty bottle is strewn below him. A torn WANTING sign and sheet hangs on the cracked wall. A bird-like creature peeks out from behind the sheet, claws grasping the fabric.

Charlotte Sophia sits in a dark room making artificial flowers by the sole light of a candle that sits on a table. She sits barefoot as a newt-like creature crawls up over the table’s ledge towards the candle. As she leans towards the light, we see her blackened eyes grown weak from straining. Empty bottles and roses lie below her. A torn sheet hangs across the right top half of the image.
Charlotte Sophia’s father, who was thought to be dead, returns in uniform at a graveyard. Several medals hang from his pristine white uniform, and his handlebar moustache covers most of his face. He stands reverently before a tall grave, hat in left hand and eyes lowered. The grave is understood to either be his or that of his deceased wife. Dark clouds float overhead. A small animal is wrapped around the corner of the grave.

Meanwhile, her father, who was not dead after all, returned home.

Charlotte Sophia’s father is now dressed in a large cheetah-print fur coat, cabby hat, driving gloves, and racing goggles. He sits in an ornate motorized carriage and looks out towards the street as she searches for Charlotte Sophia. He clutches the throttle of the carriage with his right hand. His face is largely hidden between the goggles and his large moustache. The creature peeks out from below a nearby grilled fence.

Every day he motored through the streets searching for her.
Back in Charlotte Sophia’s dismal chambers, the drunken brute lunges angrily towards the girl with a broken bottle in hand. While his face is turned, we are able to see his furrowed left brow. He holds two artificial roses in his other hand and has tucked another behind his ear. Charlotte Sophia kneels pitifully facing towards a wooden beam. Dirty sheets hang overhead. A serpentine creature crawls towards Charlotte Sophia.

Charlotte Sophia, with sunken black eyes, runs barefoot into the snowy street. Her white nightgown is ripped and her hands flail above her. She looks like a ghost. She is mid-step as she enters blindly into the street. A oppressive stone building serves as the background. A creature peeks out from behind a snow bank.
Charlotte Sophia’s flattened body lies face down in between snowy car tracks. Her arms are extended above her. The wheels of a carriage are visible from the right of the frame. A creature sits watching from the pillars of the stone building in the background.

Charlotte Sophia’s father has now exited the carriage and stands over his daughter in the snow. His cheetah print coat is huge, blocking his face and most of Charlotte Sophia’s body from the reader except for her feet. The creature, having grown three limbs on each arm, crawls up the side of the stone building.
Charlotte Sophia’s father kneels in the snowy tracks and hold Charlotte Sophia’s dead body. He looks down at her, eyes obscured by goggles. He appears unmoved emotionally. Charlotte Sophia’s left hand hangs down loosely. Her eyes are blackened and stare off as her father supports her head up. A bat flies overhead to the left of the image. Edward Gorey’s signature ‘EG’ is stacked in the bottom left of the frame.

This image is featured on the back of the book. It is the same size as the proceeding illustrations. A large gargoyle-like creature splays across the frame. The creature has two heads, talons, large wings, and a long tail. The body of the creature is curved, facing towards us. Both sets of eyes look directly towards the reader. Below its front claws, an ornate mirror featuring the reflection of a deceased Charlotte Sophia drops down. The animal could be likened to a grim reaper. The image is heavily shaded.
This is the opening image of *The Hapless Child*. The illustration presents Charlotte Sophia as she stands flanked by two raised curtains. In cursive font, the caption below the image reads, “There was once a little girl named Charlotte Sophia.”

Charlotte Sophia is depicted as pale, her whiteness exacerbated by the darker surroundings that Gorey attends to with heavier shading. She wears a white collared dress with big sleeves, stockings, and pointy black shoes. Her hair is loose and hangs neatly around her face. Her hands are folded across her front and her feet face outwards, nearly in plié position. Charlotte Sophia appears happy and comfortable with a soft smile on her face.

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Charlotte Sophia stands in the threshold between two richly decorated rooms. Two large black curtains, tied back with tassels, reach from floor to ceiling as they separate the two rooms. A patterned carpet runs throughout. The room in the foreground is covered with ornate patterned wallpaper. A tassel hangs down to the left of the room over a plush chair. To the right, a large painting hangs in a thick frame. The contents of the painting are cut off in the image. Underneath the painting is a vase and a small statue. A long reptilian limb hangs just over the side of the vase, ending in a split claw. This is the first depiction of Gorey’s creature that he features hiding in every image of *The Hapless Child*. Below the vase is an ornate bookshelf, filled densely with thickly bound volumes. The shelf rests on four clawed feet.

The room in the background is smaller. The room is covered with a different ornate wallpaper, and the bottom half of the far wall is covered with wood paneling. A large potted plant stands on a small round table. The table’s legs are artfully interwoven and a doily sits on top. A huge portrait hangs to the right of the wall surrounded by a large frame. The person’s head in the painting is cut off by black hanging curtain. We are only able to see the person’s front buttoned coat in the painting—the rest is obscured.

In this illustration, Gorey welcomes us to his Bakhtin-like carnival. He uses visual techniques to mock the Victorian aesthetic, such as his depiction of oppressive furniture and funeral-like curtains. Gorey also employs foreshadowing of death in his illustration to satire the course of typical children’s literature. Gorey thus enumerates the subversive qualities of our fashionable fascination with death by adding a comic quality to the stylistic interpretations of the institution.
The theatrical nature of this opening image engages the reader in universal excitement, similar to the dimming of the lights or the raising of the curtains before a show. In this illustration, the curtains are drawn back, the protagonist stands before us, and the opening lines are read. Clearly Gorey drew from his obsession with the ballet—the entire scene appears dramatically staged, and Charlotte Sophia is dance ready in frothy white dress and plié position. Thus, from the very beginning, *The Hapless Child* is presented to the reader as a heightened reality. Gorey establishes an environment that is satirical, unrealistic and fleeting—there is a clear entry point and exit. He engages us in a carnival spirit through his presentation of grotesque imagery that distinguishes the world of *The Hapless Child* from the real.

While Gorey includes nothing in the illustration that directly references death, Gorey adumbrates the fatal course of his story through subtle references. The black curtains look macabre and hang like hooded grim reapers across the page; this allusion is made all the more real by the cutting off of the portrait’s head by the deep fold in the cloth. The curtains also remind us of funeral traditions in the practice of pulling drapes closed after someone dies. In addition, the limb of the creature reaching out of the vase adds a haunting spirit to the story. While the creature is never referenced, Gorey includes it in every image as a bystander to the events of *The Hapless Child*. The lurking nature of the creature and suggestive setting plague the book with an anxiety for what’s to come and help develop the macabre spirit Gorey preferred.

In the illustration, Gorey mocks the death focus manifested in the Victorian aesthetic. Gorey depicts an accurate Victorian living room that includes the era’s favorite

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furniture choices such as “rococo chairs, stained glass, and tapestries.” However, Gorey pushes the stylistic preferences of the Victorian to an extreme through conflicting patterns and extreme drapery. As a result, Charlotte Sophia’s living room looks garish and overwhelming. The room appears impractical at the expense of decorative choices: the large hanging portrait is cut off due to the expansive size of the curtains and the location of the rococo chair along the wall does not make it seem effective for sitting. Gorey effectively parodies the Victorian aesthetic through exaggeration, making it appear a style better fit for dramatic scenery than décor for a home.

In addition to Victorian style, Gorey satirizes cultural practices derived from the era. Specifically, his depiction of Charlotte Sophia mocks the sentiments derived from the Victorian cult of the child. Gorey interprets the Victorian romantic expectation of children to be “at once uncannily beautiful (‘bewitching’) and pathetically vulnerable” through his illustration of Charlotte Sophia. Charlotte Sophia is delicate, attractive and happy—she retains all the qualities of the ideal child. However, she is dressed entirely in white and looks like a ghost. She is eerie in both color and countenance—her folded hands and closed mouth smile make her appear all too submissive. Gorey mocks the expectation for children to be “seen but not heard” by portraying Charlotte Sophia as a ghost, achieving the ultimate ethereal presence. Gorey makes fun of the era’s romantic ideal for children to be supernatural beings making Charlotte Sophia appear just as that—dead. Gorey here again comments on the ridiculous nature of the Victorian morbid sentimentality through use of exaggeration in his work.

In addition to these visual elements, Gorey also produces parody through language; the first page of *The Hapless Child* reads, “There once was a little girl named Charlotte Sophia.”90 Gorey’s opening line makes the facts of the book accessible to the reader, appearing similar to any other introduction to children’s literature or fairy tale. The words are easy to understand and simple, helpful to children reading with a limited vocabulary. However, in the context of the supporting imagery and morbid foreshadowing, the caption is out of place and bizarre. Gorey mocks the literary institution that expects an idyllic and happy opening—e.g. the infamous first lines, “Once upon a time”—by imposing the institution of death representative in various illustrative forms.

While the reader is welcomed to *The Hapless Child* with classical devices for children’s literature—language, happy child, beautiful home—they are really entering into another episode of Gorey’s world. Gorey engages us in his carnival by infusing death throughout his opening image: a blunt choice for children’s literature. He parodies various institutions through exaggeration and extreme contrast, making us laugh at each other and ourselves as we realize the inaccuracy of our expectations. We engage in the fundamental qualities of Bakhtin’s universal spirit by participating in a “laughter of all the people.”91 Gorey’s first illustration helps direct the energy and focus of *The Hapless Child*, introducing the reader to the subversive qualities of the book and dispelling any notions of an idyllic tale.

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This is the sixth image in *The Hapless Child*; its caption reads, “Her mother fell into a decline that proved fatal.” The illustration features Charlotte Sophia next to her mother, who rests on her death bed. The image is an implied response to the departure of Charlotte Sophia’s father to war and subsequent announcement of his death.

Charlotte Sophia’s mother rests on a large four-poster bed. She is propped up by three big pillows and covered by a blanket with an ivy pattern. Her bedroom is covered with a different, arguably conflicting, wallpaper pattern that looks like small seahorses. To the right of the bed is a small bedside table that holds a vintage medicine bottle, a framed picture of Charlotte Sophia’s father, and a cup of liquid with spoon inside. The

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bedroom is carpeted in another design of curvy lines. Gorey’s creature has morphed into a frog-like animal and hides under the bed. He is partially hidden by the edge of the blanket, but is sprawled underneath peeping upwards at Charlotte Sophia’s mother with big white eyes.

Charlotte Sophia’s mother reclines on her bed under the covers with arms outstretched. She looks quite emaciated compared to her former self, evident in jutting cheekbones, prominent collarbones, and sunken eyes. Her hair is loose and hangs limply around her. She wears a white collared gown that is very similar to Charlotte Sophia’s. Her left hand extends towards Charlotte Sophia who stands to the left of the bed. Charlotte Sophia is hardly visible over the bed; however we are able to see her eyes peek over and hand grasp her mother’s. She looks scared with big eyes and furrowed brow. As usual, she looks ghostly pale especially in the heavy detailing and shading Gorey applies to the bedroom.

In this illustration, Gorey satirizes grief within the institution of death. He parodies our response to death, those both natural and formal, through the mother’s extreme case of ennui and surrounding imagery. Gorey reprises the satirical elements of grief through his parody of the Victorian aesthetic and Gothic literary tradition. He presents the illustration of the typical death scene in a comic manner through an overly dramatic portrayal of Charlotte Sophia’s mother. In this manner, he voids death of any actual meaning, and exaggerates the absurd qualities to produce a humorous effect.

Gorey derides the Victorian incorporation of death into fashion in his visual imagery. Similar to the previous image, Gorey exaggerates the Victorian aesthetic through a heavy handed interpretation; for example, the contrasting patterns on the
carpet, wallpaper and bedding produce a nauseatingly ornate effect. In fact, while Gorey includes the tapestries and furniture typically found in a fashionable Victorian home, his thick application of the aesthetic conjures a look that the era abhorred—“superficial vulgarity.”

Gorey uses exaggeration to produce an illustration that mocks the heavy and dense qualities of Victorian style in application.

In this illustration, Gorey references the demise of Queen Victoria after the death of Prince Albert. After her husband’s passing, Queen Victoria entered into a deep mourning and seclusion that she never quite left. Gorey recreates this sentiment in an illustration of a wife’s mourning after a husband, here with Charlotte Sophia’s mother. The mother lies gaunt in bed under the portrait of her husband; pitiful as her only comfort is that of her daughter who can barely see over the enormous size of her death bed. The mother limply extends a hand towards her daughter, a literal and figurative stretch for her.

Through his depiction of the mother, Gorey mocks the consuming nature of grief that was fashionable in the Victorian era. The mother—who has no obvious physical problem—is torn asunder at the death of her husband. She is no longer able to act as caretaker to her daughter, provider of the house, or even sit up without help. The extremity of her response is also evident through her rapid physical decline—she is previously depicted as an extremely style conscious and elegant women. Her helplessness appears vain and unnecessary, a manifestation of Victorian style rather than an actual ailment.

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95 Ibid
Gorey uses language to also mock the mother’s extreme response. Within Gothic literature, the terrorizing sentiment pervasive throughout the genre often stems from a psychological haunting.\(^{96}\) Gorey presents such psychosis through the mother’s deadly ennui—“a decline that proved fatal.”\(^{97}\) The melodrama exhibited by the mother mocks the Gothic genre as she is not haunted by any fundamental psychological problem. Although she expresses grief over her purportedly dead husband, her mourning appears more about herself, as she is tortured in her desire to stay fashionable. The mother dies as she and her mourning—quite literally—take up too much space.

Through this illustration, Gorey challenges grief through parody. Through the character of the mother, Gorey highlights the narcissism inherent in our response to death. Oftentimes, we become so consumed with the requisite period of mourning that sadness becomes about ourselves rather than about the loss of others. Gorey displays this vanity through an exaggerated display of Victorian style—to which grief was fundamental—and a misapplication of the psychological qualities within the Gothic. Gorey’s parody is comically exaggerated, but also hugely insightful. Within the formal responses required by the institutionalized qualities of death, Gorey suggests that we lose any actual meaning or substance as we instead strive to produce a certain image.


This image is the seventh of thirty pen-and-ink illustrations featured in *The Hapless Child* (1961). The picture is 4x5 inches, reproduced to the same dimensions as Gorey’s original drawings.98

The image features a man, Charlotte Sophia’s uncle, getting killed by a falling piece of plaster. The caption reads, “Her only other relative, an uncle, was brained by a piece of falling masonry.”99 The man is walking outside on cobblestones nearing the corner of a building. He is facing away from us, approaching the street, evident by the

99 Ibid 7
difference in direction of crosshatching. The small animal appears as a newt curved over one of the stones of the building and faces towards the man.

Just beyond the immediate figure is a fenced outdoors space. There is dense shrubbery within the speared, sinister looking fence, and a large Roman-inspired statue stands looming overhead. The statue faces away from the reader, and mirrors the body language of the man as both have one leg forward and are facing towards a certain direction. The surrounding environment is bleak and hazy, consistent with the tone of the caption.

The man is wearing a large coat with fur cuffs, a top hat, gloves, and stockings. He appears well to do considering his outfit, and is carrying a cane with a piece of gilded material on top. The man is rather large considering the scale of his body to the surroundings. He has dark hair, and a bit of his full beard peeks out over his coat.

A piece of masonry is falling onto the man’s head, presumably a piece of the building he stands next to as the material looks similar. It is not clear if someone dropped the descending material purposefully on the man, or if it happened to fall randomly. However, it is evident that the falling masonry is a surprise to the uncle. He is mid-step, with one foot lifted, right as the material hits him, and his cane is mid-air—gloved hands still swinging—as he just dropped it. The resulting illustration portrays an exact moment: the instant Charlotte Sophia’s uncle intersects with death and meets his fate.

In this image, Gorey parodies death in its random nature. Gorey uses the fatal falling of a piece of masonry—a bizarre and most unusual circumstance—to exacerbate the arbitrary situation. Gorey recognizes that death is inevitable and omnipresent: when it strikes, it often presents itself in strange circumstances. Gorey recognizes that these
events—such as falling objecting, lightning strikes, or unusual ailments—can be construed as comic in their arbitrary nature; dying via falling masonry is such an abnormal way to die that the fact it is the fate of Charlotte Sophia’s sole relative exacerbates her impossibly unfortunate fate. Gorey thus highlights the anonymity in death through expression of its random occurrences.

Through the application of the lens of Bakhtin, we can better understand the intention of Gorey. Gorey suspend the hegemonic institution of death, as articulated by Bakhtin, by mocking its implied sincerity. Gorey uses a very serious, grave tone to narrate the ridiculous ending of Charlotte Sophia’s uncle. However, Gorey uses modern slang—“was brained”—and a bizarre cause of death, thus mocking the style of a typical death announcement. The over dramatization of the caption is also evident in the fact that the uncle was Charlotte Sophia’s last resort to a somewhat happy life after becoming an orphan; he was her “only relative.” The extremity of this situation and the lack of implied emotion heighten the ridiculous nature of the course of events: the plot is most impractical and irrational. Gorey mocks the death of the uncle and unfortunate fate of Charlotte Sofia with language that is too perfunctory and hyperbolic to describe a typical death. In this way, Gorey’s caption is subversive as he manipulates the formal language expected by the institution of death in order to enhance the comic nature of his work.

Gorey produces Bakhtin’s idea of the carnival in the suspension of the institution of death. As readers view the image and are aware of Gorey’s intention, they are freed from the requisite polite respect or pity for the dead. They can laugh as Gorey has

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102 Ibid
provided space for them to witness the humor in death as any expectations of formality have been negated.

In addition to Gorey’s writing, his illustration also continues the spirit of the carnival. The image is dramatic and dark, hyperbolic in form. The main figure appears quite haunting: the uncle is tall, and regal in a large fur coat and top hat. We are unable to see his face, making him seem like a menacing, indestructible force. His body language mimics the carving in the background, implying a statuesque manner about him.

However, the falling piece of masonry mocks the stoic nature of the man. He stone hits the man on the side of the head at an awkward angle and causes him to drop his gilded cane. The uncle’s upper class dignity—as inferred from his clothing—has fallen. In addition, the piece of masonry is cut off in the image. This conjures the immediacy of the moment, and also the randomness of the event. Thus, despite his style, the uncle’s death is made more pathetic as it was completely unavoidable.

In addition to the moment of death, what Gorey implies as coming next also adds to the derision. After the uncle dies, he will presumably fall over in a great thump—the uncle’s body large body slumps over as his fur coat fans around him, cane clacks against the ground. While this event would be terrible, it contains humorous elements in the sharp descent of the uncle’s manhood. The uncle, who embodies so many elements of the fashionable Victorian man, succumbs to conventionality of death. Gorey thus mocks his elegance as he maintains that, despite class, no one is free from the most uncivilized of endings.

Lastly, Gorey uses the newt-like creature to serve as a sharp contrast to the surrounding events. Gorey has a creature hiding in every image of *The Hapless Child*;
however the animal appears more prominently in this illustration and is newt-like. The creature is wrapped around a piece of stone in a curvy, languid manner. He is positioned forwards, watching the uncle’s death from the comfort of his position wedged on a stone—the very same material as the masonry falling on the uncle’s head. The newt holds onto the stone as it provides him support—a direct juxtaposition to the stone that is killing his neighbor. The newt’s indifference and safety heightens the absurdity of the uncle’s death: even a small creature can avoid being crushed under a falling rock while a sophisticated man cannot. Gorey mocks the uncle’s death--and the random nature of death, in general—by pairing its imagery with the lowliest of creatures: a newt, who is most basic in ability.

Many of these techniques Gorey here employ mocks the Victorian. The Victorian aesthetic is evident in the man’s stately being and style of dress, the statue in the background, and the stonework of the fateful building. These components come together to comprise a haunting setting reminiscent of those conjured by Emily Bronte or Edgar Allan Poe. However, Gorey manipulates the Victorian aesthetic of the image to deride the authority the period granted to the institution of death. When approached with Gorey’s intended mockery, the man’s style appears theatrical, the statue artificial, and the caption grandiloquent. The hegemony of death becomes clownish, and we are left laughing at its excessive makeup and banal performance.

While Gorey intends for the image to be humorous, he does confront the reader with a sense of unease. Death surrounds us constantly, and the idea that we could die suddenly—without being sick or forewarned—is unnerving. Gorey reminds us of this

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presence, and while Bakhtin believes unease ruins the spirit of the carnival, Gorey uses it to his advantage to promote his comic agenda. As we see the death of the man in Gorey’s illustration, we recognize we are all going to die eventually; so, we wonder, why are we so afraid? Gorey answers this by highlighting the absurdity in death; it’s completely trivial, anonymous and volatile. Death is not a scary institution but rather an inevitable part of human existence. When we die, Gorey suggests, the manner in which we do is random and unpredictable—oftentimes, in the lack of control over the event, death is actually quite funny. Thus, Gorey makes death palatable by shortening our proximity to it and redirecting any potential unease through parody.
This image is the twenty-second of thirty pen-and-ink illustrations featured in *The Hapless Child* (1961). The picture is captioned, “From time to time the brute got the horrors.”

This illustration appears after Charlotte Sophia was kidnapped and sold to a drunken brute following her escape from an orphanage. The brute (name not provided) keeps Charlotte Sophia in his dingy, windowless home, and forces her to make artificial flowers. We are told in the previous panel that Charlotte Sophia lives on “scraps and tap-water,” and her flower crafting eventually causes “her eyesight to fail rapidly.” Over the six panels that depict Charlotte Sophia living with the brute, the child’s physicality

105 Ibid 21-23
declines as evident in her increasingly emaciated body, stringy hair, and hollow eyes. Charlotte Sophia’s uniform white gown, which appears neat in the opening pages, becomes torn and loose over the course of living captive with the brute.

In the image, Charlotte Sophia is cowering in the right corner against a wall, kneeling on a small quilt (her bed?). Her body is faced to the wall, and her head is turned to look at the brute to her left. Her face is visible although somewhat darkened by the shadow of the brute’s figure. She looks frightened, as evident in her wide eyes and open mouth, and protects herself with crossed arms over her chest. She looks tired with bags under her eyes and unbrushed hair.

Hanging over Charlotte Sophia is a large ripped, dirty sheet—one of many that is hung around the brute’s home. Gorey’s trademark small creature peeks out from behind the sheet, beak and claws extended just visibly over the sheet. The walls are cracked and the floor is dirty. A ripped sign is in the left of the frame; although several of the letters are torn, the sign presumably reads “WANTING” with text and several names listed below. The room is dark and crumbling, reminiscent of a dingy dungeon.

The brute is depicted in motion, mid-step with right foot extending and balancing on his left toes. His left arm reaches forward with his palm outward, signifying a halting or protective motion, and right hand is clamped over his eyes. He is leaning back, causing his shirt to lift and his distended belly left exposed. His mouth is open, as if moaning. The brute wears a white blouse and checkered pants. He is barefoot.

On the ground below the brute is an empty bottle. Gorey has depicted the brute with the same bottle over the past two frames, each time with less liquid inside. Considering Gorey’s introduction of the character as a “drunken brute,” the character has
presumably imbibed. The dance-like position he holds also suggests that he’s in a
drunken stupor.

Although Gorey only articulates that the brute has got “the horrors,” it is inferred
that the brute is going through withdrawal symptoms from alcohol that produce
hallucinations. In this state of delirium experienced by alcoholics occasionally, the
subject enters into an altered mental state as the body withdrawals from stimulants.
Thus, the brute appears to be experiencing “horrors” as he is confronted with malicious
hallucinations during withdrawal.

In this illustration, Gorey conjures a situation encountered many times before:
child held captive by evil character; previous examples from literature include Hansel and
Gretel, Hades and Persephone, and Rumpelstiltskin. However, Gorey’s depiction is a bit
more complicated. Through the spirit of the drunken brute, Gorey generates the spirit of
Bakhtin’s festive carnival. Although Gorey confronts us with death in the horrors
envisioned by the drunk, he also reflects a sense of revelry and energy. The brute appears
celebratory and animated; we smile as we watch him dance across the page. Thus, we are
taken out of the brute’s dingy basement, beyond the confines on the page, and into the
carnival as Gorey grants entry through the suspension of the weighty impositions of
death.

Consistent with Gorey’s tone maintained throughout The Hapless Child, the
caption for this illustration is unemotional and removed. The use of “from time to time”

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107 Ibid 22
108 “The Perils of Alcohol Withdrawal,” Recovery Ranch, last modified March 30, 2013,
The previous panel read, “She lived on scraps and tap-water.” The brute’s hallucinations are expressed as if just another aspect of Charlotte Sophia’s daily life—an aside description of her surrounding environment. Additionally, Gorey’s use of punctuation adds to the unconcerned manner of narration. He fails to use a comma after “From time to time,” a comma misuse, which adds to the flatness of the caption. Gorey’s declarative and brief tone is also expressed by his insistence on using a period after every caption. Without the break of a comma, the period appears severe and highlights Gorey’s flippancy towards Charlotte Sophia’s misfortune. Gorey’s punctuation reflects his desire to maintain efficiency in his caption rather than leave room for natural human interpretation—i.e. pauses, exclamation, and various reading speeds. Gorey’s mocking blasé thus establishes a removed tone with which he derides exaggerated spiritual and emotional responses to the institution of death.

In the illustration, the brute is a comic tool. He’s dressed in clown-like checkered pants, and moving in a dancing motion. He looks as though he’s performing; without the caption, the illustration would appear as though the brute were entertaining Charlotte Sophia with an energetic round of hide-and-go-seek or, considering Gorey’s love of ballet, an interpretive dance.

However, the brute is drunk. In the revelry of his drinking, the brute enters into the carnival spirit and eliminates societal expectations—namely, sobriety. In his grappling with “horrors,” the brute interacts prematurely with death in an unusual manner.

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111 Ibid 21
112 Ibid 22
that temporarily suspends death’s institutional, scientific, and rational nature.\textsuperscript{114} The brute reintroduces a Victorian tradition that challenges sensibility in death through a more spiritual approach. As Victorians sought to better understand the afterlife in their death-centric culture, they expressed their anxiety through an interest with ghosts, supernatural, and séances.\textsuperscript{115}

Gorey parodies this tradition through the absurd behavior of the brute. As a terrible spirit overtakes him, the brute engages in the type of supernatural activity that was so popular among Victorians. However, Gorey depicts the brute as theatrical, clown-like, and drunk; it’s hard to take him seriously. In this manner, Gorey undermines Victorian traditions and questions the authenticity behind those who rationalize a spiritual nature in death. Furthermore, Gorey’s argument can be applied to more modern times in a commentary on those who turn to religious authority for greater understanding into death. Gorey thus suggests that spirituality in death is a ridiculous quality of the institution that manifests more in folly than actual truths.

Gorey uses visual techniques of exaggeration to engage us in the carnival spirit. Gorey heightens the pitiful nature of Charlotte Sophia by making her appear tiny, hiding in a corner. Even Gorey’s bird-like creature, which has sharp claws and beak, hides from behind the torn sheet, peeking out sheepishly towards the direction of the brute. Contrastingly, the brute is depicted as over the top, taking up most of the space in the image in a dramatic fashion. All the attention—that of Charlotte Sophia, the creature, and the reader--is directed towards him. Both Charlotte Sophia and the brute are confronted with death; for Charlotte Sophia, she fears the brute’s wrath and power, while the brute

experiences haunting supernatural visions. However, their responses prove opposite extremes to each other. Through suggestive composition, Gorey exaggerates the situation and mocks his characters in their heightened responses to impending death. Readers maintain the carnival spirit as they recognize the severely volatile nature of human reaction to death, and thus find humor within the absurdity of varying responses. Gorey challenges societal institutions that implicitly require an extreme emotional reaction to the event of death—sadness, fear, anguish—as the resulting imagery appears unnatural.

Through this illustration, Gorey parodies the theatrical qualities we exhibit in response to death. Gorey suggests that our emotions are not genuine but rather satirical reactions that are expected by the religious, spiritual or cultural practices to which we subscribe. Gorey challenges the institutionalized nature of death as he proposes we respond in a choreographed manner that proves humorous when watched from afar or seen in illustration.
This is the twenty-fifth image in *The Hapless Child*. The illustration comes as a break to the recounting of the unfortunate fate of Charlotte Sophia by reverting back to the story line of the father. Charlotte Sophia’s father was last reported “killed in a native uprising” after going to serve as an army colonel in Africa.\(^{116}\) Here, he miraculously comes home alive; the caption reads, “Meanwhile, her father, who was not dead after all, returned home.”\(^{117}\)

The illustration features Charlotte Sophia’s father alone in a graveyard. He is in uniform: a white button down shirt with shoulder pads, white pants and white shoes. The

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\(^{117}\) Ibid 25
shirt has a high collar, and three medals adorn his front. He looks neat and well kempt. He holds a white panama hand in his left hand.

The father faces a tall grave reverently with closed eyes. While it’s difficult to see his full expression behind his large moustache, he appears stoic and devout—he could possibly be in prayer. His right hand reaches out towards the grave, and his right knee is bent.

The father stands in a cemetery with five nearby graves of varying styles. Two of the graves are classic—flat rounded stone and cross—and two others are pillars adorned on top with an urn and angel statue. The latter grave is to the right of the father, and features a winged angel kneeling in prayer. The grave the father stands closest to appears to be the largest in the yard and continues on out of the frame. The stone grave is of obelisk shape and stands on a small platform. It is unclear who is buried at the grave.

Gorey’s creature, depicted here as small and horned, wraps around the left side of the grave and looks at the reader. A low black fence surrounds the pillar, about to the height of the father’s knees. The fence meets in arches with small spears on top.

The cemetery appears slightly desolate with tall wild grass growing to the left side. Several dark black clouds hang overhead, giving the image a foreboding feel. The rest of the sky is also heavily shaded, casting a dark shadow across the cemetery, graves and the father’s face.

In this image, Gorey parodies the somber approach we bring to death through the classic illustration of a graveyard. Gorey manipulates context and language to express a parody of the Gothic genre’s heavy application of death. Specifically, he uses the depiction of the father looking at the anonymous grave to argue the forced sincerity with
which Victorians approached death. Through visual techniques, Gorey also comments on
the oppressive nature of the Gothic in the event of death, leaving the actual event devoid
of meaning.

After twenty pages of believing Charlotte Sophia’s father was dead, it is
surprising to the reader to learn he is alive; there is no allusion and little leading up to this
illustration. In addition, the image comes in the midst of Charlotte Sophia’s kidnapping
by the drunken brute, interrupting the reader. Gorey language reflects the random nature
of this event and the flippancy with which he approaches death: “Meanwhile, her father,
who was not dead after all.” Gorey’s phrasing of “after all” reads as a statement of fact
rather than a significant revelation of life.

Through his language and placement of this image, Gorey parodies the pervasive
nature of death and the afterlife in literature. Through this illustration, Gorey implies that
literary representation of death in the Gothic can minimize the actual meaning of the
event. Gorey produces this sentiment through inaccuracy in reporting the father’s death
and subsequent flippancy in tone upon rectifying. This idea of anonymity in the Gothic
death is also manifested visually by the grave in front of the father; it is unclear if the
grave is his, his wife’s, or perhaps a fellow colonel’s. However, as Gorey implies, it
doesn’t even matter—the pervasive nature of death manifested by the spirit of the Gothic
genre has minimized the significance. Gorey mocks this cultural practice through
informal tone, highlighting room for humor in his error.

Gorey also mocks the Gothic through visual exaggeration. He presents a classical
cemetery scene that is pervasive in many Gothic novels—for example Dracula and
Wuthering Heights. He provides all the necessary ingredients for the episode: brooding

sky, severe gravestones and mournful husband. However, the image comes together in a cartoonish, heightened way rather than as meaningful. The reader focuses more on the aesthetic of the graveyard than pickup on any sadness—again, this is seen in the anonymity of the grave. Gorey’s decision to portray the creature sitting on the grave also demonstrates the casual nature of the image. The grave exudes so many unfriendly, somber qualities—pointed fence and cold stone—however the animal perches on top, unbothered. The graveyard is like a theatrical set, aesthetically detailed but devoid of significance. Thus, the illustration is powerful in its ability to conjure the imagery of death, not the sensation.

Finally, Gorey uses visual contrast to provide commentary into the unnecessary qualities of the scene. The father, who is dressed in white and carrying a panama hat, has just returned from a colonial uprising in Africa, presumably a response to European colonization. Handsome and decorated in uniform, the father looks out of place in the sinister graveyard. The father’s whiteness contrasts with the dimness of environment, panama hat hanging pathetically from his hand towards the speared fence. Through contrast, Gorey mocks the father and derides the colonial regime for its unnecessary qualities.

Thus, in this illustration, Gorey uproots those institutions that enforce conditions upon others: the Victorians to style, the Gothic to literary scheme, and colonization to individual’s livelihood. Gorey undermines these forces through mockery making us aware of the meaningless standards they demand. Gorey uses his images to an effort to

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further his agenda as he points out the comic nature of those powerful institutions that rule us.

XIV. Image 6

This image is the final of thirty pen-and-ink illustrations featured in *The Hapless Child* (1961). The picture is 4x5 inches, and is captioned, “She was so changed, he did not recognize her.” Gorey’s signature, “EG,” is left in small text on the bottom right corner.

This drawing is the final scene in the sequence of four that illustrate the death of Charlotte Sophia. After escaping from her drunken brute captor, Charlotte Sophia, now

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121 Ibid
“almost blind,” runs frantically into the street. Meanwhile, Charlotte Sophia’s father, who was believed to be dead until halfway through the story, is driving through the streets looking for his daughter. He accidentally hits his daughter, and climbs out of his car to view the damage. Charlotte Sophia, now drastically changed from her previously prim appearance after her kidnapping, is unrecognizable to her father. He crouches in the snow, and holds the dying child who he does not know is actually his daughter.

In the illustration, Charlotte Sophia appears as a corpse. Her white dress is torn, and she is barefoot in the snow. Her eyes are black and hollow, and her body is thin. She is limp in her father’s arms; her left arms hangs down lamely, and her father is supporting her neck. She is clearly very close to death, or already dead.

Charlotte Sophia’s father is dressed in a driving costume, complete with goggles, hat and gloves. He is a large man, emphasized by his oversized, fur-lined, cheetah print coat. The coat consumes his body, especially around the neck, and leaves just his face exposed. We are unable to see his eyes as the driving goggles obscure them, and his large curled mustache covers his mouth. He kneels gracefully on one knee in snowy tire tracks, holding Charlotte Sophia easily in his arms. While it’s difficult to find much emotion from the costumed character, his body language and general disposition appear disaffected. He does not lean closely to Charlotte Sophia, but sits upright and stares at the girl from a distance.

The setting of the illustration matches the bleak tone of the event. A large stone structure comprises the background, appearing cold and uninviting to the reader. Snow is piled along the sidewalk, the crevices of the building, and on the street. Contrasting

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against the white snow, dirty tire tracks stretch the length of the frame, and suggestively continue on. Gorey’s chooses a bat as his trademark animal here, which hovers over to the left of the two characters. The bat has two small eyes, and casts a shadow along the stone building.

Gorey’s caption to the image is quite simple. Gorey takes his signature unaffected approach, relaying the matter of events as a statement. The unemotional nature of the illustration is driven further with Gorey’s choice to use pronouns instead of names. This practice emphasizes the impersonal nature of the scene. Charlotte Sophia’s father is unable to recognize his daughter, thus she is nameless to him—the only identifying quality is that Charlotte Sophia appears female, thus she is simply “she.”

In addition to the language Gorey uses, it is necessary to consider the caption in the context of its location in *The Hapless Child*. Considering this is the final page of the book, it feels abrupt and terse. The reader is not left with closure or the ability to imply what comes next; actually, we even expect there will be another page to follow.

Gorey’s sudden departure as narrator reinforces his detachment towards Charlotte Sophia’s fate, and the story in general. He enters into the plot whenever he chooses, and leaves in the same manner. While this void of emotional capacity could be construed as concerning, instead it manifests as funny. When the reader reaches the final page, its reads almost as a direct antithesis to every other children’s story. The little girl is left dead, her life unredeemed, and her loving father unintentionally kills her. The contrast between this reality of this page and our expectations for a conclusion is severe. The

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illustration appears absurd in its juxtaposition to the norm, and we laugh at ourselves for expecting anything different from Gorey’s work.

Although Gorey’s language is minimal, his imagery is hyperbolic, most evident in the appearance of his two characters. Charlotte Sophia’s body is exaggerated to stress her pitiful—or better, hapless—circumstances, evident in her languid arm and vapid eyes. She looks similar to Hortense, Charlotte Sophia’s doll, who met an equally ugly fate when she was “torn from limb to limb.”¹²⁴

Most notably, however, Charlotte Sophia’s father proves to be the most absurd character. His elaborate driving suit and animal print coat make him seem fashionable, even avant-garde against the bleak backdrop. Considering the stiffness of the father’s position, his clothing, and the suspended bat, the image reads almost as a still from a photo shoot. The illustration maintains a contrived quality that is forced but also funny in its awkward nature. The father looks extremely out of place in the image, especially while clutching a withering child. Again, Gorey uses the technique of contrasting extremes in close proximity to each other. Gorey creatively manipulates his characters to reconcile modern style—cheetah print coat—with the Gothic aesthetic—dying child, archaic building. This contrast generates humor as the reader recognizes the absurdity of the illustration’s composition in both style and form.

To better understand what comic forces are at play in the illustration, it’s important to consider Bakhtin. We enter into Bakhtin’s carnival through the suspension of various institutions. First, as gleaned from discussion of the caption, Gorey undermines any literary expectations by offering a conclusion that does everything but

conclude. He subverts the path of the typical story, producing humor as the reader is exposed to a new literary rhythm that is quirky and original.

Secondly, Gorey derides the emotional responses embedded within the institution of death. When Charlotte Sophia’s father holds his dying daughter, he does not know who she is. The scene is futile; both characters have undergone so much that reconnecting fortuitously in an anonymous fashion construes the plot in a comic way. Gorey engages us in the carnival by challenging why sadness is such an integral part of the system of death. In this scene, Charlotte Sophia’s father expresses no remorse as he does not recognize her; therefore, why do we approach death with such emotion? When death is anonymous, we feel very little; however we are constantly socially required to approach death with great fanfare: elaborate funerals, long-winded letters, sobbing. While losing a loved one is devastating, Gorey suggests that there is room for expression other than sadness when the death is far away. In Gorey’s art, he clearly finds humor when the formality and requirements of death are dissolved. He utilizes this space allowing for creative expression that is surprisingly not impolite or insensitive. Gorey thus recognizes a niche within the institutional powers of death that can be—and arguably should be—suspended to afford more dynamic responses.

Finally, we subvert the social institution that asserts expectations of the portrayal of children. Gorey frequently depicts dying or dead children in his work—for example, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*.¹²⁵ He directly confronts the societal forces that view children as sacred and immaculate. Instead, Gorey resists these expectations by putting children in horrible situations in his work. Gorey recognizes that children are not free from death,

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and it’s absurd that we believe this. He mocks the expectations that the hegemonic
powers of death enforce that children cannot be associated creatively with death, danger
and violence because it’s unsightly. Gorey makes us aware that we subscribe to a system
that is inaccurate—children do die—and the fact that we often ignore this is bizarre,
perhaps a little spooky. Furthermore, when Gorey produces work with dying children, we
don’t see his illustrations as inappropriate or immoral. In fact, his publishers market all
his books as children’s literature. Gorey makes us aware that there is an unnatural void in
the institution of death, and the comedic aspects of death can also be discovered with
children.

Gorey invites us into the carnival by tearing down societal customs that are
fundamentally unnatural to the way humans actually respond. While his work
theoretically makes one uneasy—wounded children, apathy in death—the actual results
are nonthreatening and enlightening. Gorey recognizes a humor to be teased out from our
social nervousness and hesitancy and takes advantage of the creative space offered to him
to express it. Gorey makes us realize that death, with all things, has a comic element that
is underutilized and should thus be interacted with.
Part XV. Conclusion

Upon entering Gorey’s carnival, we are aware of the multiplicity of institutional forces to which we subscribe by force and choice. However, when carnival-less, powerless underneath their domain, their abilities are of terrifying strength. We are compliant with these forces that are universal in nature. Not until we engage in the carnival spirit are we able to escape and gain insight.

Gorey dismantles the institution of death. He provides us key insights into the forced constraints made on human nature as we let go and enter into his world. Gorey suggests that we have lost touch with the meaning and ramifications of death. We’ve become distracted by the loud, glittery qualities of death in its various forms: sexy, melancholy, egotistical, scary. These characteristics manifest in specific forms such as a literary genre, style aesthetic, and cultural movement. We are compliant with these institutional representations as they remove us further and further away from ourselves. We are left out of touch.

Gorey uses his sense of humor to manipulate these practices and prove their malicious effects. He points out the satirical qualities of these institutions and their unfounded representations of reality. Moreover, Gorey undermines the foundation of these systems and questions our compliance with them.

In his work, Gorey confronts himself and the reader with death constantly. Through this practice, he demonstrates the pervasive nature of death. Death is an inevitable, organic and random process. However, rather than be scared of dying, which is arguably an institutionalized reaction drawn from horror films and spooky stories, Gorey directs us to reengage with the event through our childlike impulses. Gorey’s use
of children is by no means an accident; children follow their instincts and react in an undirected manner. Children are discrete from the surrounding institutions as they have not yet succumbed to their powers. Instead, they respond naturally.

Gorey’s tales are not terrifying or gory; instead, they are mini tales of truism and insight. His books help connect us to ourselves—our childlike, untouched uninhibited self. We are attracted to his work as we gain relief through them. No longer tethered to the demands of higher powers, we are free to respond however we want—perhaps even through laughter.

When first writing my thesis, I felt dispirited. My initial research led me to some darker works and I was surrounded by images of dying children daily. I became envious of my friends’ theses which, at the time, had seemingly much more jolly titles—nuclear waste management, for example. In my thesis, death was pervasive and I felt suffocated under its weight.

However, the more I engaged with Gorey, the more thoughtful I became. Although I was still living in a world of the macabre, I realized there is a severe distinction between death and Gorey’s death. The isolated feelings I had before were those that were compliant with institutional forces. I realized these powers controlled in me in other ways as well—for example, how I hate scary movies or feel awkward when I hear someone has died.

Now, I understand the philosophy behind Gorey’s work. Gorey tells us that we cannot rely on these institutions to decree how feel; we’ve become too dependent. Gorey’s work is attractive to so many readers as through it we are allowed—if not
encouraged-- to be ourselves. Gorey tears down constructions, and asks us to feel as we may.

Now, I see death as something that is inherent and important to us all, and deserving of a response that is real. Death is complex and manifests in so many different ways; it’s pathetic, crippling, random and bizarre. While I still comply with certain institutional forces of death—I keep a Ouija board in my living room and sage stick in my bedroom to clear out evil spirits—it is a knowledgeable, aware participation. As I complete my thesis, I expect to continue to interact with Gorey in the future as a source of insight and inspiration.
Part 3

Bibliography


http://www.theartstory.org/movement-pop-art.htm