

Tracing the grotesque: anderson's model in faulkner and woolf



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In "The Book of the Grosteques," the first story of his novel *Winesburg, Ohio*, Sherwood Anderson introduces the concept of the "grotesque." This concept sets up the following stories in the novel, and can also be seen in other modernist texts following the publication of *Winesburg, Ohio*. Anderson specifically traces the birth of the grotesque back to a time when the world was pure, and a conglomeration of vague thoughts formed beautiful truths: "Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful" (Anderson 12-14). However, people began to take up these truths and attempted to make them their own. What resulted was a distortion of these truths: they were turned into lies, and the people themselves became grotesque upon attempting to own these truths. "The moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood" (Anderson 15-17). In developing his idea of grotesqueness, Anderson not only provides a key into how to read *Winesburg, Ohio*, but also articulates a way to portray characters by reducing them to a single characteristic. Modernist authors following Anderson, specifically Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, latched onto this notion and created characters who defined themselves by a singular truth. Although effective, the implementation of this type of character as one-dimensional and symbolic becomes problematic in its oversimplification. These characters represent particular aspects of humanity, but the humanity is lost on them due to their lack of complexity. There is a distance between the reader and the read, because they are not believable, organic characters - only caricatures. In her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf expands on <https://assignbuster.com/tracing-the-grotesque-andersons-model-in-faulkner-and-woolf/>

Anderson's notion through the character of Peter Walsh. Woolf's approach differs from Anderson's in that some of her characters are grotesque in order to display the complexity of other characters, such as Clarissa Dalloway. The juxtaposition of Peter Walsh and Clarissa Dalloway positions Peter as an inadequate foil. They are by no means equally represented; Peter's follies and vanities are exaggerated. Instead of sympathizing with Peter, we are disgusted by him. Clarissa is allowed both faults and triumphs, and her character is constructed as a human being rather than as a gross distortion of a few human characteristics. To follow suit with Anderson, Peter Walsh "snatches up" the truths of romantic love and youth. His dripping sentimentality serves as a threat to Clarissa's impenetrability. Because Peter's grotesque character is created to embody these truths, readers begin to conflate romantic love with his portrayal. This leaves few alternatives for love in the world of Mrs. Dalloway. The reader spurns Peter in favor of Clarissa, who has no room for this type of love: "Peter is her version of that repulsive brute with blood-red nostrils, human nature, and of that sexual and spiritual defilement it demands—that passionate and penetrating and soul-destroying love" (Spilka 332). Peter vacillates between resenting Clarissa and loving her completely. Clarissa's powerful yet subtle presence is able to bring proud Peter to his knees, despite his superficial background of "journeys; rides; quarrels; adventures; bridge parties; love affairs; work' work, work" (Woolf 46). Clarissa's maintenance of a private self is perceived by Peter as "coldness." However, when Woolf gives us such limited options, between Peter's maudlin love and Clarissa's platonic, subtle love, we choose Clarissa each time, in fear of the "penetrating and soul-destroying love" that Peter represents and in favor of Clarissa's "privacy of the soul" (Spilka 332; <https://assignbuster.com/tracing-the-grotesque-andersons-model-in-faulkner-and-woolf/>)

Woolf 138). Peter's constant self-aggrandizement creates an unflattering portrait of an older man in love who has not yet matured. One of his more unflattering moments occurs during his chase of the young woman dressed in black. During this chase he views himself to be "an adventurer, reckless, he thought, swift, daring, indeed (landed as he was last night from India) a romantic buccaneer, careless of all these damned proprieties..." (Woolf 57). For the one-dimensional Peter, this woman is a one-dimensional symbol of his youthful fire, which he revels in. After nearly two pages of this illusion, Peter gives up the chase in order to revel in the fantasy. The reader experiences the predictable, appalling deflation: "The girl, silk-stockinged, feathered, evanescent, but not to him particularly attractive (for he had had his fling) alighted" (Woolf 58). This unrealistic, chauvinistic fantasy serves to appall the reader and reveal the capricious nature of Peter's affections. Peter's idealization of youth and his pride in understanding youth suggest a resistance against the natural process of aging: "for he understood young people, he liked them" (Woolf 52). His marriage to Daisy exemplifies his desire to hold on to youth. His inner monologues are riddled with judgments. In "Notes on the Grotesque," James Schevill explains, "the grotesque is often beautiful because it is openly human and exposed" (Schevill 235). Unlike Woolf's detestable Peter Walsh, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* portrays a more beautiful kind of grotesque. In the beginning of his section, the troubled Quentin Compson evokes the reader's sympathy in a way that Peter Walsh cannot. This is because we believe Quentin's torment to be poignant and justified, and we are drawn in by his pain and eloquence. However, as his section progresses, Quentin's behavior becomes more erratic and less beautiful. His discussions with his father, coupled with his

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attempt to lure his sister into death or incest expose Quentin as a grotesque, inseparable from his obsessive, skewed perceptions of morality. In Mrs. Dalloway, Peter's one-dimensionality serves to position Clarissa as a more complex and balanced character. In the case of Quentin and Caddy Compson, Quentin actually narrows Caddy's character, bringing her down into his distorted vision. Through Quentin's eyes, we see Caddy and Caddy's "sin" as one. The reality is carried through this conflation without objection until the momentum of Quentin's grief is interrupted with a memory of a conversation with Jason Compson, his father. The father and son are discussing the worth of virginity. Quentin remembers his father's justification for his son's torment: "And Father said it's because you are a virgin: don't you see? Women are never virgins. Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. It's nature is hurting you not Caddy and I said That's just words and he said So is virginity and I said you don't know. You cant know and he said Yes. On the instant when we realize that tragedy is second-hand" (Faulkner 116). Through Mr. Compson, Faulkner gives a more objective (yet cynical) view of Quentin's obsession with purity. It is here that we begin to see the irrationality of Quentin's actions and the distorted vicariousness of his pain. This distortion ultimately results in Quentin's suicide, but long before this, he wishes for a double suicide on the day that Caddy loses her virginity: "I held the point of the knife at her throat/it wont take but a second just a second then I can mine I can do mine then" (Faulkner 152). Even once Caddy consents, Quentin cannot bring himself to kill his sister. He reaches for something just as tragic, leading Caddy to the ditch where Nancy's bones lie. Nothing comes of this, but the bewildered reader looks on with uncomprehending horror at Quentin's obsession.

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Quentin feels either form of “ death” could baptize him and Caddy so intensely that they will both be made clean again. Unable to emerge from his ego and his family, Quentin sees salvation as an immersion in his particular kind of love. Karl F. Zender sheds light on Quentin’s puzzling attempt to solve his moral dilemmas: “ Clearly, Quentin wishes to understand his incest fantasies as asexual in origin and atemporal in effect. They are, he believes, a way of rescinding Caddy’s sexual initiation...and, by extension, of denying the descent of the Compson family and of the South into the modern age” (Zender 747).