

The use of the grotesque in mahfouz's midaq alley and o'connor's "good country pe...



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The idea of the grotesque is presented in both Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Midaq Alley* and Flannery O'Connor's short story "Good Country People." Although the settings, plots, and characters differ, both works present an underlying theme of distortion of the moral or religious beliefs of the culture. The grotesque can appear in different aspects of the story, and this distortion, an inherent part of the grotesque, may emerge in the setting, objects of the story, or characters, among other elements. While the style and tone of *Midaq Alley* and "Good Country People" differ, the authors of both works use the grotesque as a powerful tool, especially in the portrayal of the characters of both works. In general, Mahfouz and O'Connor depict the grotesque in two categories of characters: those that are mentally or spiritually grotesque and those that are physically grotesque. Often, and especially in O'Connor's work, grotesque characters fall into only one of those categories, and thus a tension arises between the character's self-image and true self. However, in *Midaq Alley*, Zaita, the cripple-maker, provides a unique example of one who is both physically and spiritually grotesque. He is first introduced on page 54: "If you once saw Zaita you would never again forget him, so starkly simple is his appearance. He consists of a thin, black body and a black gown. Black upon black, were it not for the slits shining with a terrifying whiteness which are his eyes. [...] Black was the fate of everything within this hole." Mahfouz excels in description, especially in the use of imagery in service of characterization. In Zaita's case, he is described with a multitude of words relating to blackness and filth. Even the word "whiteness" in the passage is preceded by the word "terrifying." On a surface level, this passage provides the reader with intense characterizations of Zaita and the use of the physically grotesque; but as he <https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-the-grotesque-in-mahfouzs-midaq-alley-and-oconnors-good-country-people/>

is further described, his spiritual distortion becomes more fully visible: " He [Zaita] happily reciprocated the dislike people showed for him, and he jumped with joy when he heard that someone had died" (56). The tension that is introduced here, discernible simply from the words used (" happily" and " dislike," " joy" and " died,") shows Zaita as a man that distorts the morals of the surrounding culture and destroys traditional norms. He achieves this goal through his cripple-making, in essence spreading the grotesque throughout the entire alley, and he " wished that beggars formed the majority of mankind" (56). Zaita represents in *Midaq Alley* an extremely pessimistic view of human life, and he is often compared to the devil throughout the novel. His distorted views of the alley strongly oppose other characters' views, and there is an intrinsic question raised in Zaita's character about whether he is morally right. He has a philosophical argument with Husniya, the baker's wife, in which he fully explains his grotesque ideas: " " Which of us is not at first welcomed into the world like a king of kings, to be later carried wherever ill fortune decrees. This is one of nature's wisest treacheries. Were it to show us first what is in store for us, we would all refuse to leave the womb" (132). This distorted understanding of life implies that Zaita has rejected " nature" and instead found beauty in the grotesque, as shown in his love of mudholes and garbage as a child (133). He renounces the typical Muslim values of Midaq Alley, but still thrives in the inhabitants' ability to sin. Overall, Mahfouz uses the grotesque in Zaita to give a fuller picture of Midaq Alley and show the darker side of Arab culture. Zaita, the cripple-maker, is unique in that he is both physically and psychologically grotesque. A more common grotesque character is one that is either

physically or psychologically grotesque, but not both. An example of this in <https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-the-grotesque-in-mahfouzs-midaq-alley-and-oconnors-good-country-people/>

*Midaq Alley* is the character of the pimp, Ibrahim Faraj. Faraj has no deformities and is in no way physically grotesque; in fact, he is rather handsome and dresses in a fashionable Western suit. His outward appearance creates tension with his psychological grotesqueness. Like Zaita, Faraj has opinions that do not fit with the tradition of Eastern culture. He distorts this culture by pointing out its faults to Hamida and giving her everything she wants. He is generally described with words concerning the ideas of coldness and detachedness, conveying his lack of emotion (257-259). It is this lack of emotion that identifies his grotesqueness. In the alley, Hamida had two men wanting to marry her, indicating the importance of love and marriage in that culture. However, when she leaves the alley (an act symbolic of her Westernization), sex becomes a tool to satisfy her need to control and also a loveless act. She still holds love in her heart for Faraj, a sign that she is still in some ways a part of Midaq Alley, and it is Faraj's grotesque lack of emotion that most affects her. " He [Faraj] himself had never known love, and it seemed strange to the romantically inclined girl that his whole life should be built on this sentiment. Whenever a new girl fell into his net, he played the part of the ardent lover — until she succumbed. [...] When his mission was accomplished he dropped his role of lover for that of the flesh merchant" (256). This passage reflects Faraj's inability to love, a grotesque characteristic that forces Hamida to leave him. The use of the grotesque in Faraj serves the purpose of being a mirror (an important motif in *Midaq Alley*) to Hamida and her values, and it can also be seen as a comment by Mahfouz on Western culture and its distortion of Eastern values.

Flannery O'Connor uses the grotesque in " Good Country People" through both of the main characters, the Bible salesman and Hulga. The climax of the <https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-the-grotesque-in-mahfouzs-midaq-alley-and-oconnors-good-country-people/>

story centers around a seduction of Hulga by the Bible salesman in a barn, during which the Bible salesman tricks Hulga, steals her artificial leg, and reveals his true self. The Bible salesman can be seen as a parallel to Faraj from *Midaq Alley*. They are both appealing on the surface, and yet they are both spiritually or morally distorted. A symbol of the Bible salesman's grotesqueness is his Bible case that he carries with him at all times. Like many grotesque characters in O'Connor's works, he is completely controlled by this grotesqueness: " He had appeared at the door, carrying a large black suitcase that weighted him so heavily on one side that he had to brace himself against the door facing. [...] It was rather as if the suitcase had moved first, jerking him after it" (277). This use of the grotesque functions as an obvious distortion of religious values: during the climax of the story it is revealed that, instead of Bibles, the case actually contains alcohol and condoms. Much like Faraj in *Midaq Alley*, the Bible salesman deceives Hulga into loving him, only to use her for a different purpose. His affinity for prosthetics is another aspect of his grotesqueness, and one that shows his love for grotesquerie itself. Hulga, much like Hamida, is a stubborn, willful girl; unlike Hamida, however, Hulga is physically grotesque. Her prosthetic leg sets her apart from the rest of her family and has caused her to have a bitter disposition, demonstrated by her name change from Joy to Hulga. Her deformity has created a spiritual grotesqueness that she takes pride in as a reflection of the distance between her and her traditional family. "' We are all damned,' she said, ' but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation'" (288). Hulga's statements, which are pessimistic and even nihilistic in nature, are similar to some of Zaita's statements in *Midaq Alley*, but her opinions change as the <https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-the-grotesque-in-mahfouzs-midaq-alley-and-oconnors-good-country-people/>

story reaches its climax. Instead of keeping her inward grotesqueness, Hulga allows herself to fall in love with the Bible salesman. When she removes her artificial leg, she also expels her spiritual distortion and, with some hesitance, lets down her last barrier to the world: “ Without the leg she [Hulga] felt entirely dependent on him” (289). It is when Hulga is most vulnerable, then, that the grotesque appears in the Bible salesman, and he steals her leg. ““ You ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!”” (291). This final statement, a subversion of Christianity and the moral values of society, reveals the Bible salesman’s grotesquerie and appears to contain more intensity than Hulga’s similar statements earlier in the story. The use of the grotesque in the Bible salesman functions as a reflection of Hulga’s physical grotesqueness, and in this juxtaposition, O’Connor reveals that Hulga has the capacity to be morally aligned with the values of her culture. However, O’Connor also shows Hulga’s love for the Bible salesman — her moral realignment — to be a mistake, because Hulga is left with nothing when the symbol of her grotesquerie is taken. In Hulga’s dependence on the grotesque, she becomes the victim of the story. In both *Midaq Alley* and “ Good Country People,” the function of the grotesque is not only to characterize, but also to reflect the distortion of the society’s moral and religious values. The purpose of the grotesque as it appears in Zaita is to show a character who is an outcast of Midaq Alley and one who has rejected traditional Arabic values; and yet, ironically, he still thrives inside the alley. His subversion of the moral values of his culture leaves him alone and filthy, and it eventually leads to his demise; however, he would not survive without the alley, its beggars, and the baker and his wife, who give him a place to stay. As much as he despises the culture of the alley, he is an integral part of

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it and never makes an attempt to leave. The use of the grotesque as a reflection of the distortion of traditional values appears again in the characters of Faraj, Hamida, the Bible salesman, and Hulga. Mahfouz and O'Connor use Faraj and the Bible salesman, respectively, as character foils for the main protagonists, Hamida and Hulga. In the cases of Faraj and Hamida, the grotesque serves as a thematic element in the story. Faraj's moral subversion of Arab culture (and more specifically, of Midaq Alley) causes Hamida to reject Western culture, but she ultimately never returns to the alley. Likewise, in " Good Country People," the Bible salesman's moral subversion of Christianity leaves Hulga without her sole defense to the world: her prosthetic leg. In both cases, the authors use the grotesque to create tension within the story and within the characters. This tension builds until the climactic revealing of the grotesque, when Hamida and Hulga are both forced to choose between the distortions and that which is being distorted. In all, each author uses the grotesque to present the subversion of the religious and moral values of society through characters that, in their physical or spiritual grotesqueness, question the merits of those values themselves.

*Works Cited* Mahfouz, Naguib. *Midaq Alley*. Trans. Trevor Le Gassick . New York: Anchor Books, 1992. O'Connor, Flannery. *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* . New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971.