CHAPTER TWO
TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF THE GROTESQUE

'Grotesque' is a term, which has a history of more than five centuries, and the evolution of its present meaning is an interesting instance of semantic development. It is generally accepted that the word 'grotesque' was coined to designate the ornamental style on the murals, which were excavated during the late fifteenth century in different parts of Italy. The chambers of the Roman buildings, especially the Baths of Titus and the Domus Aurea or Golden Palace of Nero, yielded “dainty, innocuous frescoes” decorating the walls (Harpham 23). The peculiar setting of these designs which eclipsed their inherent qualities earned for them the name “grottesche” which means pertaining to underground caves. These antique paintings were distinguished by “the interweaving of plant, animal, human and architectural forms so that a stone pedestal would become the torso of a human figure with curling plants for arms and an animal’s head” (Thomson 35). Thus the term ‘grotesque’ is derived from the Italian ‘la grottesca’ (noun) and ‘grottesco’ (adjective), derivatives of ‘grotte’ which means cave, and is ultimately derived from the Greek word ‘vault’.

In his Lives of the Renaissance painters, George Vasari extended the meaning of the word 'grotesque' from “the imitative antique style of wall painting to the composite, fantastic, contemporary style in sculpture and architecture of the late Renaissance in Italy” (Barasch 24), especially that of Michael Angelo who perfected the arts by inventing new fantasies that defied
reason and rule. The grotesque style was embraced by the patrons of Italian art all over Europe and Vasari's view of the grotesque had a hold on Europe until the eighteenth century. The word began to don unpleasant connotations only after the development of classical criticism.

In Germany also the term 'grotesque' began to get recognition as early as 1549. In sixteenth century Germany, there were three major forms of ornamental art—'scroll work', 'arabesque' and 'moresque'—associated with the 'grotesque'. In the terminology of Renaissance Germany, the word was often used in lieu of these three styles. The combination of human and animal forms in the grotesque style gave rise to another connotation to the term 'grotesque' in Germany, i.e. "monstrous". Thomas Wright aptly remarks, "the monstrous is closely allied to the grotesque" (8).

The word 'crotesque' was used in France as early as 1532 and continued to be used as the prevailing form until the late seventeenth century when it was replaced by 'grotesque'. The word 'grotesque' occurs in English about 1640. When the English adopted the word 'antickes' in the seventeenth century to refer to weird figures which were from Italian 'grottesco' which meant 'chimera', 'demon', 'fool', and 'clown', its meanings were supplied to 'grotesque'. The best example is that of Shakespeare who uses 'anticke' (also spelled 'antique') to refer to death in Richard II. "[...] and there [death] the Antique sits / Scoffing his state, and grinning at his Pompe" (III. ii. 162-3).

The extension of the word 'grotesque' to literature began in France as early as the seventeenth century. Such a semantic change took place in
English and German only in the eighteenth century. Its inception can be seen in the works of Sir Thomas Browne. In his popular work, *Religio Medici*, Browne employed the word ‘grotesque’ for ‘chimeras’ and ‘demons’.

Milton makes use of the term ‘grotesque’ in the fourth book of *Paradise Lost* (1677) to describe Satan’s view of the hill of Eden crowned by Paradise itself.

So on he [Satan] fares, and to the border comes
Of Eden, where delicious Paradise,
Now nearer, crowns with her enclosure green,
As with a rural mound the champain head
Of a steep wilderness, whose hairy sides
With thicket overgrown, grotesque and wild,
Access deni’d [. . .]. (131 – 37)

Milton’s ‘grotesque’ refers to the irregular nature of this natural world which is never pleasing as it is filled with grots, dens and cavities which can evoke feelings of fear or horror.

As stated by Barasch, in the neoclassical age the prevailing taste in art and literature in England was “Grotesque and Gothique” (95). Comedy, the leading genre of the age, assumed assorted disguises and contradictory definitions. Its humour was based on “‘deviations from nature’, the ridiculous, the incongruous, and, especially, the deformed” (Barasch 95). Grotesque taste was considered unnatural and both ladies and gentlemen of refinement frowned at it. As literary criticism began to sprout during the eighteenth century, there was a scarcity for literary terms and it was solved
by borrowing many terms from the sphere of art. ‘Grotesque’ was one among them, and it meant disorder and irregularity.

John Dryden was the foremost Restoration critic to make an analogy between ornamental paintings known as grotesques and poetry. In his work *A Parallel of Painting and Poetry* (1695) he maintains:

> There is yet a lower sort of poetry and painting which is out of nature: for a farce is that in poetry, which grotesque is in picture. The persons and action of a farce are all unnatural, and the manners false, that is inconsisting (sic) with the characters of mankind. Grotesque painting is the just resemblance of this [...].

(*Essays II*, 132-3; qtd. in Barasch 125)

The inferior type of poetry and painting is unnatural. The place of the grotesque in a picture is equivalent to that of a farce in poetry. A farce deviates from the characters of mankind because of the presence of the unnatural persons, actions and fake manners.

Dryden mentions Horace who begins his *Art of Poetry* by describing a grotesque figure which has a man’s head, a horse’s neck, the wings of a bird, and a fish’s tail. The mad imagination of the artist works in such a way as to jumble together the different species to induce laughter. At the same time, the Church painters use it to divert the people at public prayers, and to keep their eyes open at a long sermon, and ‘farce-scribblers’ employ the technique to entertain citizens and country gentlemen.

As Barasch rightly observes, Dryden’s parallel is a complete statement of the seventeenth-century view of the grotesque and supplies the link
between sixteenth and eighteenth-century grotesque. Dryden was of the conviction that even though a grotesque writer cannot please the audience, he can at least make them laugh.

The English manifested their predilection for the grotesque in opera, burlesque, farce, and essays produced during the neoclassical period. John Hughes, a contributor to *The Spectator* and a friend of Addison, opined that allegory was a ‘grotesque invention’.

In the essay “On Allegorical Poetry”, prefixed to his edition of Spenser, Hughes speaks about grotesque invention; the grotesque invention is that in which “the Fable or Story consists for the most part of fictitious Persons or Beings, Creatures of the Poet’s Brain, and Actions surprising, and without Bounds of Probability or Nature” (qtd. in Barasch 130). When a fable or story is vibrant with fictitious persons or creatures and surprising, improbable and extraordinary action, that is a grotesque invention. In such works the readers cannot rely on the literal sense and hence they are compelled to seek another meaning under these wild types. This grotesque invention claims a peculiar license to itself and it is meant by the word ‘allegory’.

Arthur Clayborough describes the situation under which the term ‘grotesque’ began to take novel meanings in English during the Age of reason and Neoclassicism.

The word ‘grotesque’ thus comes to be applied in a more general fashion in English [...] when the characteristics of the grotesque style of art—extravagance, fantasy, individual taste, and the
rejection of 'the natural conditions of organization'—are the object of ridicule and disapproval. The more general sense [. . .] which it has developed by the early eighteenth century is therefore that of 'ridiculous, distorted, unnatural' (adj.); 'an absurdity, a distortion of nature' (noun). (6)

During the neoclassical period, it became fashionable to make an increased use of the word 'grotesque'. It was a time when the features of the grotesque style such as extravagance, fantasy, and unnatural organization were ridiculed. As a result, by the early eighteenth century the word 'grotesque' developed the meanings of 'absurdity' and 'distortion of nature'.

Thus new meanings were ascribed to the word. Johnson defines the word in his dictionary (1755) as 'distorted of figure; unnatural; wildly formed'. This derogatory sense continues to be even now.

The terms 'grotesque', 'burlesque' and 'caricature' were used synonymously in the first three quarters of the eighteenth century. Joseph Addison, in 1710 designed grotesque caricatures to ridicule the Catholics and later they resulted in identifying grotesques with the lewd art. He describes it as "a wrong artificial Taste" (Spectator, No. 70. 297).

In 1740, Horace Walpole, in his anti-Papist poem "Epistle from Florence" praising the peace brought by Henry, the first Tudor, compared the arms and armour hanging in Westminster Hall to the much-admired grotesque decorative style:

Reposing sabres seek their ancient place
To bristle round a gaping Gorgon's face.
The weary'd arms grotesquely deck the wall,
And tatter'd trophies fret the royal hall. (*Works* I, 13; qtd. in Barasch 111)

Many people who were banished from the country return to the land and there is no clarion that obstructs the delights of the brides. All the sabres take their original position around a gaping Gorgon’s face. The exhausted weapons decorate the wall grotesquely, i.e. in an attractive way. The interweaving of the monster and the arms creates the grotesque here.

Before the middle of the eighteenth century, an attempt was made in England to give definite meaning to the grotesque as an aesthetic category. Fielding’s preface to *Joseph Andrews* and Hogarth’s *Anecdotes* are a case in point. English mind began to appreciate the caricatures in Samuel Butler’s *Hudibras*, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and in the works of Henry Fielding and William Hogarth. Caricature, with its distorted imitation and sordid reality, began to be considered a right form of art.

In the third quarter of the eighteenth century, Christoph Martin Wieland, a writer on caricature, realized that dissociation from reality was the essence of the grotesque. He viewed grotesques not as “imitations but products of a ‘wild imagination’ “ and consequently for him the grotesque is ‘supernatural’ and ‘absurd’ (Kayser 31). His analysis also highlighted the psychological effect of the grotesque on the perceiver. According to Wieland, several contradictory feelings are aroused by the grotesque: surprise, horror and fear. As Kayser puts it, we “smile at the deformations but are appalled
by the horrible and monstrous elements” (31). Justus Moeser, a German writer, as the title suggests, in *Harlequin: or a Defence of Grotesque Comic Performances* (1766), made the first move in defending ‘grotesque comedy’. In his opinion eighteenth-century grotesques were imitations of ancient practice. Moeser’s defense of Harlequin and Wieland’s psychological analysis of the grotesque supplied ample footing to the term.

During the Romantic period the word ‘grotesque’ took on another shade of meaning. Walpole in his *The Castle of Otranto* employed the word to refer to Gothic architecture. Romantic literature imbibed the meanings of ‘highly fanciful’, ‘fantastic’ and ‘exceedingly strange’ from the word.

In 1800, Friedrich Schlegel published a seminal document of the Romantic aesthetic titled *Conversation on Poetry*, in which the concept of the grotesque was discussed elaborately. He considered “the mixture of heterogeneous elements, the confusion, the fantastic quality, and even a kind of alienation of the world” (Kayser 51) the essential ingredients of the grotesque. Schlegel’s definition of the grotesque took on historical significance.

Jean Paul, the German novelist, in his theoretical work *Primer of Aesthetics* (1804) dwelt on “the annihilating idea of humour” by which he meant that type of humour which is coloured by pain and awe, which is aware of evil and the abyss. Jean Paul, who belonged to the tradition of satanic and black humour, thus added the element of dark and grisly humour to the grotesque.
Victor Hugo in the preface to his drama *Cromwell* (1827) made an extensive study of the term grotesque. He viewed it as the hallmark of both ancient and modern art. He detected the presence of the grotesque everywhere creating antithetical feelings and emotions; as Kayser aptly notes, "on the one hand it creates what is deformed and horrible, on the other what is comic and farcical" (57). Though Hugo highlighted the monstrous and horrible aspects of the grotesque by putting it in proximity to the hideous, he realized that the “true depth of the grotesque is revealed only by its confrontation with its opposite, the sublime” (Kayser 58). Hugo distinguished between the grotesque in nature and the grotesque in art. In nature the grotesque is the antithesis of everything that is sublime; but in art, a grotesque object may be aesthetically sublime as the treatment is more important than the material. The use of the grotesque in art may take it to the realm of the supernatural. Thus Hugo is remembered for bringing the grotesque from its marginal position in art to that of centrality.

In 1827 Sir Walter Scott also adduced his ideas on the grotesque in his essay “The Novels of E. T. A. Hoffman”. Scott does not find any meaning in a fantastic narrative devoid of moral purpose. He criticizes Hoffman for confusing the supernatural with the absurd. Making a comparison between the grotesque in Hoffman’s work and the arabesque in painting Scott furnishes a definition of the grotesque:

In fact, the grotesque in his compositions partly resembles the arabesque in painting, in which are introduced the most strange and complicated monsters, resembling centaurs, griffins, sphinxes,
chimeras, rocs, and all other creatures of romantic imagination, dazzling the beholder as it were by the unbounded fertility of the author’s imagination, and sating it by the rich contrast of all the varieties of shape and colouring, while there is in reality nothing to satisfy the understanding or inform the judgment. (qtd. in Kayser 77)

Kayser considers Hegel the last thinker whose observations on the grotesque involve a metaphysical view of the phenomenon. Hegel’s posthumously published Lectures on Aesthetics (1835) renders some suggestions. He views the forms of Indian art as grotesque. Employing the phrase, ‘fantastic symbolism’, Hegel maintains that Indian art does not have a union of form and content as there is between the idea of strength and the image of the lion. Hegel was able to point out the nexus between the supernatural and extra-human, diminishing the humorous aspect of the grotesque.

With the advent of the nineteenth century the word underwent another semantic change. The significant responses to the grotesque were found in the analytical writings of Coleridge and Ruskin. Coleridge in his lecture “On the Distinction of the Witty, the Droll, the Odd, and the Humourous: The Nature and Constituents of Humour; Rebelais, Swift, Sterne” (1818) gave the word ‘grotesque’ a new denotation. Coleridge observes, as Barasch quotes, “When words or images are placed in unusual juxtaposition rather than in connection [. . .] we have the odd or the grotesque [. . .] ” (153). He distinguishes two types of grotesque comedy:
‘the transcendental and the descendental’. The transcendental grotesque comedy is ‘moral’ and ‘sublime’, while the descendental is ‘sensual’ and ‘trivial’. Coleridge takes ‘oddity’ or ‘grotesqueness’ as a false kind of humour; true humour is metaphysical. Thus he attributes to the word the meaning of ‘odd’ or ‘eccentric’; and as Barasch puts it, he associates it with “comic indecorum, vulgarity, obscenity, sensationalism” and even blasphemy (154).

John Ruskin reverses Coleridge’s judgement of the earlier grotesques as mere oddities and makes a study of the grotesque in *The Stones of Venice*. He considers grotesque a purely artistic phenomenon. In Barasch’s words, Ruskin defines grotesque as “a comic genre, a type of jest based on the juxtaposition of the ludicrous and the fearful” (155). Ruskin speaks about two kinds of grotesque: noble or true grotesque and ignoble or false grotesque. Reflecting on true grotesque, Ruskin remarks that wherever the human mind is healthy and vigorous in all its proportions and is endowed with rich imagination, emotions, and intellect there the grotesque will exist in full energy; this type of grotesque is free from evil. If true grotesque is the expression of a serious mind, false grotesque is the product of a frivolous mind. Ruskin is of the opinion that it is the vulgar mind that takes pleasure in the forbidden. Hence the grotesque is “an imaginative playing with the forbidden or the inexpressible” (Steig 255).

In *Modern Painters*, part four, chapter eight, Ruskin lists three basic psychological processes from which the grotesque art evolves: “‘healthful but irrational play of the imagination in times of rest’”; “‘irregular and accidental contemplation of terrible things; or evil in general’”; and “‘the
confusion of the imagination by the presence of truths which it cannot wholly grasp’ " (qtd. in Steig 254). Ruskin establishes the grotesque as a respectable artistic genre handled by Dante, Spenser and Bunyan, and puts stress on the combination of the ludicrous and the terrible.

In 1840, Edgar Allan Poe published his *Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque*, which is a collection of twenty-five stories. By using the terms grotesque and arabesque synonymously in the title he tried to do away with the derogatory meaning of the ‘grotesque’. According to Kayser, Poe employs the word ‘grotesque’ on two different levels of meaning: “to describe a concrete situation in which chaos prevails, and to indicate the tenor of entire stories concerned with terrible, incomprehensible, inexplicable, bizarre, fantastic, and nocturnal happenings” (79). By the middle of the nineteenth century, the concept of the grotesque meant the “distortion of all ingredients, the fusion of different realms, the coexistence of beautiful, bizarre, ghastly, and repulsive elements, the merger of the parts into a turbulent whole, the withdrawal into a phantasmagoric and nocturnal world” (Kayser 79).

The grotesque was considered a vulgar species of the comic in resemblance to burlesque and caricature by famous writers even in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In Germany, Justus Moeser in *Harlequin: or The Defence of the Grotesquely Comic* (1761) and F. Th. Vischer in his *Aesthetics* (1857) got the grotesque rid of its serious connotation. Thomas Wright in *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art* (1865) and John Addington Symonds in his *Caricature,*
the Fantastic, the Grotesque (1890) viewed the grotesque as exaggerated buffoonery or the ludicrously fantastic. Walter Bagehot in his essay “Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning: or Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Arts in English Poetry” (1864) used the word to mean ‘ugly’ or ‘monstrous’.

Like Hugo, G.K. Chesterton in his book *Robert Browning* (1903) imparts the view that the grotesque is a vehicle for presenting the world in a fresh perspective without falsifying it. Chesterton perceives the grotesque in three ways: as a “reflection of the real world,” as an “artistic mode” and as the “product of a certain kind of temperament” (Thomson 17). According to Chesterton, the value of the grotesque increases in proportion to its connection with the natural world.

By the end of the nineteenth century the word ‘grotesque’ gained the stature of a serious critical term owing to the learned discourses in the preceding centuries. At the dawn of the twentieth century, a definition of ‘grotesque’ in literary criticism began to take shape. The critical word ‘grotesque’ appeared in a 1906 dissertation titled, “The Grotesque in the Poetry of Robert Browning” by Lily B. Campbell. She remarked that the tendency in literary criticism is to open art to ugly and grotesque subjects. Miss Campbell was of the view that nineteenth-century grotesque writings did not express ‘great truth’. As Barasch rightly puts:

Indeed, the weird, distorted, and fantastic worlds of the morbid romantics or of H. G. Wells, whose *The Invisible Man, a Grotesque Romance*, was published in 1897, were often superficial and sensationally grotesque. [..] Miss Campbell
reported that the literary grotesque, externally, was characterized by incongruity, confusion of the real and the ideal, or the simultaneous treatment of the real and the ideal. Grotesque literature fell into a kind of ‘border-land’ between the comic and the ugly, she said, but it was not caricature. Caricature arises from the ugly and emphasizes the comic. The grotesque, on the other hand, though it also arises from the ugly, emphasizes terror. (158)

In Campbell’s opinion, the distorted and fantastic worlds of the romantics or of H.G. Wells were grotesque only in a superficial and sensational way. She viewed the characteristics of incongruity and the simultaneous treatment of the real and the ideal in literary grotesques. She made a distinction between the grotesque and the caricature; though both of them emanate from the ugly, the grotesque stresses terror.

Campbell envisaged three types of grotesques which were in tune with the imagination of the writer: the great grotesque, the fanciful, and the artificial. The great grotesque furnishes fanciful forms akin to the sublime. The second type expresses the ugly through a playful and fanciful mind. The third type employs conscious incongruities, grotesque rhymes and incoherencies.

The grotesque genre began to acquire increasing popularity when a group of German authors active between 1910 and 1925, began to write calling themselves ‘narrators of the grotesque’. They asserted that “humour and terror are twin children of their mother imagination, since both are suspicious of mere facts and distrust any rationalistic explanation of the world” (Kayser 139).
Gothic is a literary genre that affords a partial sense of the grotesque, the sense of horror or terror. Hence it will not be out of place to make a brief study of the Gothic. Gothic, meaning ‘medieval’ is an offspring of eighteenth century rationalism and morality, displaying the seamy side of the civilized mind. Gothic novel or Gothic romance is a type of prose fiction where 

imagination and emotional effects exceed reason. Passion, excitement and sensation transgress social proprieties and moral laws. Ambivalence and uncertainty obscure single meaning. Drawing on the myths, legends and folklore of medieval romances, Gothic conjured up magical worlds and tales of knights, monsters, ghosts and extravagant adventures and terrors.

(Botting 3)

Gothic is a hybrid form of many things: the romance, graveyard poetry, treatment of sublime, and permanence of architecture.

The romance depicts fabulous persons and things in lofty and elevated language, persuading the reader to believe all the descriptions as real. The graveyard poetry, appearing in the first half of the eighteenth century, revelled in describing graves, churchyards, night scenes, ruins, death and ghosts, including everything that was precluded by rational culture. Natural objects like mountains and artistic objects like medieval architecture with its cathedrals, castles and ruins were employed for evocation of sublime feelings like awe, wonder, horror, and joy. The conglomeration of all these became the hallmark of Gothic genre. The staple Gothic ingredients are “dark subterranean vaults, decaying abbeys, gloomy forests, jagged
mountains and wild scenery inhabited by bandits, persecuted heroines, orphans, and malevolent aristocrats” (Botting 44).

Gothic aims at creating uncanny effects and chilling horror by having recourse to medieval settings, devices and events. It is ambiguous about the nature of power, law, society, family, and sexuality. Ronald Schleifer in his essay “Rural Gothic: The Stories of Flannery O’Connor” notes:

The Gothic [...] presents a world beyond the understandings of metaphor, a world of mysterious inhuman forces that cannot adequately be explained by the metaphors of psychology or sociology or well-meaning humanism. It is a literature of presence unmediated by the substitutions of language, presences which are inhuman, terrifying, secret. (478)

Horace Walpole made the clarion call of Gothic by the publication of his novel The Castle of Otranto (1764) which relates the story of Manfred, Prince of Otranto, and his attempts to regain his lost lineage. This novel displays all the characteristics of Gothic with respect to setting, devices and events.

The most eminent writer of Gothic was Ann Radcliffe. Her famous work The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) recounts the story of Emily St Aubert in a Gothic setting with terrifying scenes and mysterious occurrences. Her works differed from earlier Goths in its evocation of poetic power, reverence to reason, morality, and domesticity.

Regina Maria Roche, an imitator of Radcliffe, was another successful writer of Gothic fiction in works like The Children of the Abbey (1794) and
Clermont: she depicts Gothic castles, ruined chapels, subterranean labyrinth, dark forests, and ghostly groaning.

Matthew Gregory Lewis, influenced by the German tradition of Goethe and Schiller, underscored the horror element in Gothic through his notorious work *The Monk* (1796). Satirizing and eschewing the sentimentality of Radcliffe’s work, Lewis portrays Ambrosio’s moral degradation and his pact with the devil making him a Gothic villain in the labyrinthine vaults beneath the Abbey. The labyrinth is associated with fear, confusion and alienation. Both Radcliffe’s and Lewis’s works were ambivalent in nature with their difficulty of externalizing evil.

The ember of Gothic continued to sparkle in the works of Romantic poets. While Percy Shelley’s “The Cenci” (1820) deals with the Gothic theme of vicious father’s incestuous relation with his daughter, driving her to murder, Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812-16) employs medieval language and Spenserian stanzas to create an archaic ambience. Coleridge’s “Christabel” (1816) is set in a world of knights, ladies, honour, and portentous dreams; and Keats’ “Eve of St. Agnes” (1820) manipulates superstitions associated with the chivalric world to lend an air of mystery.

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) is a Gothic text, which deploys Gothic conventions sparingly. It is the story of the scientist Frankenstein’s overweening pride and his disastrous end in the attempt to create a Brave New World. Set in the eighteenth century, Gothic elements such as ruined castles, graveyards and charnel houses appear in the novel inducing horror.
An Irish clergyman, Robert Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) is often considered the last truly Gothic text. Melmoth is a Faustian figure who sells his soul for knowledge and power and becomes a wandering figure.

The Gothic tradition got a foothold in America during the nineteenth century. Charles Brockden Brown, negotiating European and American Gothic traditions, brought some transformations in Gothic writing. He portrayed persecution, murder and the powers and terrors of the human mind through his popular work *Wieland* (1820).

Edgar Allan Poe continued the tradition; his stories like “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1834) disclose Gothic elements like architectural ruin and premature burial in a decayed family, set in a desolate and gloomy landscape. “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846) is a tale of menacing vengeance with premature burial. Poe’s tradition was resurrected in the writings of Southern writers like Eudora Welty and Flannery O’Connor who introduced grotesque characters and situations. There is a close affinity between Gothic and the grotesque. While Gothic stresses horror, the grotesque unleashes horror through the comic.

The term ‘absurd’, which has now shed its constricted meaning of ‘opposed to reason’, comes very close to the grotesque so that ‘The Theatre of the Absurd’ of which Brecht, Genet and Ionesco are members, could almost be called the theatre of the grotesque. However, there is a great difference between the two words. The grotesque can acquire a certain formal pattern, but the absurd fails to have a formal pattern and peculiar structural characteristics. The absurd can be perceived only as content, a
feeling or an attitude expressed "‘through irony, or through philosophic argument, or through the grotesque itself’” (Thomson 32). If there is possibility for consistent perception of the grotesque, i.e. the perception of grotesqueness on a grand scale, it can lead to the notion of universal absurdity.

Wolf Gang Kayser’s *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1957) is a comprehensive study of the grotesque. Kayser makes a historical study of the grotesque in German literature by drawing comparisons from other literatures. He puts forward his own theory of the grotesque. Like any work of art, the word ‘grotesque’ has three aspects: the creative process or the artist’s state of mind, the work of art itself, and its reception by the reader. Hence it has all the makings of a basic aesthetic category.

Kayser describes the grotesque in the following manner. First of all, the grotesque is the expression of a deep sense of dislocation and alienation. The familiar world is suddenly transformed into a strange and unpleasant place. The grotesque creates in us not fear of death but fear of life.

Secondly, the grotesque is a play with the absurd. That is, the grotesque artist plays, half-laughingly and half-horrified with the absurdities of existence. The term ‘absurd’ is applicable to both tragedy and to the grotesque art. For instance, it is absurd for a mother to kill her children or for a son to murder his father or for a father to eat the flesh of his son. The differences are that tragedy is interested in individual deeds and these deeds upset the moral order, whereas the “grotesque is not concerned with
individual actions or the destruction of the moral order” (185). But Wilson Knight in *The Wheel of Fire* (1930) argues that there are some grotesque elements in the tragedy *King Lear*. Many critics hold the view that the grotesque is indispensable to tragedy.

Thirdly, Kayser points out that the creation of the grotesque is an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world. This refers to the psychoanalytic or cathartic effect of the grotesque art. Grotesque art is an attempt to exorcise our secret fears by bringing it into the light. Kayser observes that the truly artistic portrayal effects a secret liberation of the feeling of desolation and horror stimulated by “the dark forces which lurk in and behind our world” which have the power to estrange. “The darkness has been sighted, the ominous powers discovered, the incomprehensible forces challenged” (188). The grotesque art liberates the mind by naming and externalizing the unknown fears in the form of demons of disorder.

The preceding analysis points to the fact that the term ‘grotesque’ does not have a steady meaning. But some characteristics recur in the discussion of the term. According to Philip Thomson, the most consistently distinguished characteristic of the grotesque is “the fundamental element of disharmony, whether this is referred to as conflict, clash, mixture of the heterogeneous, or conflation of disparates” (20). This disharmony is present not only in the work of art and in the reaction it produces in the reader or spectator, but also in the creative temperament and psychological make-up of the artist. Though the comic, paradox and irony present the clash of incompatibles, the factor that separates the grotesque from the others is that
the conflict is between the comic and the terrifying. The presence of these two elements may vary in its degree. But the peculiarity of the conflict in the grotesque, unlike in the comic, irony and paradox, is that the conflict is ‘unresolved’. The unresolved condition creates tension in the readers, which in turn produces an unsettling effect on their minds.

Still another feature of the grotesque is that exaggeration is conspicuous in it. Exaggeration leads the grotesque to the sphere of the fantastic and fanciful. But the grotesque is not fantastic through and through as in a fairy tale. The strangeness of the grotesque is set against the backdrop of a realistic world. The comic confusion of the real with the unreal, producing disorientation and horror, is the source of the grotesque.

In 1970 Michael Steig made an attempt to give a psychological definition to the grotesque in his article “Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis”:

The grotesque involves the managing of the uncanny by the comic. More specifically: a) When the infantile material is primarily threatening, comic techniques, including caricature, diminish the threat through degradation or ridicule; but at the same time, they may also enhance anxiety through their aggressive implications and through the strangeness they lend to the threatening figure. [. . .] a state of unresolved tension is the most common result, because of the intrapsychic conflicts involved. (259-60)
Steig views the grotesque as a means of managing the uncanny experiences of childhood, especially the menacing ones, by comic techniques like caricature. While assuaging the threat through degradation or ridicule, it increases anxiety because of the strangeness lent to the threatening figure. The comic diminishes the possibility of identification with infantile drives by means of ridicule; at the same time it ‘lulls inhibitions’ on a preconscious level. Consequently, the ‘intrapsychic conflicts’ create a state of unresolved tension. Through his definition Steig locates the source of the demonic, points out the roles of the uncanny, of caricature, and of the comic, and charts the processes involved in our response to the grotesque.

The grotesque comprises an element of abnormality which is comic and disgusting simultaneously. It is a fusion of vicious irony and low comedy. Distortion is the first and foremost technique adopted by the grotesque artist and as a result values are pulled down from their high pedestal to the level of common or below common standard. Thus it becomes an index of the tormented vision of life.

It is a difficult task to come to an all-encompassing definition. Thomson defines the grotesque as “the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response” (27). This clash is matched by the ambivalent nature of the abnormal as present in the grotesque. He also offers a secondary definition of the grotesque, “the ambivalently abnormal” (27).

It is not only feasible but also desirable to examine what form the grotesque takes in literature. Grotesquerie may appear in a novel in diverse forms: in characterization, incidents, situations, and narrative technique.
A character may become grotesque in his abnormality, either physical or mental. For example, Michaelis, one of the anarchists in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) is a paradigm of the physically grotesque. He is "pathetic in his grotesque and incurable obesity" (93). It is as if the accumulation of fat on his chest engenders a wheezing sound. He is "round like a tub, with an enormous stomach and distended cheeks of a pale, semi-transparent complexion, as though for fifteen years the servants of an outraged society had made a point of stuffing him with fattening foods in a damp and lightless cellar" (42).

Thomson in his book *The Grotesque* quotes a passage from Samuel Beckett's novel *Watt* to acquaint the reader with a family of grotesques:

There was Tom Lynch, widower, aged eighty-five years, confined to his bed with constant undiagnosed pains in the caecum, and his three surviving boys Joe, aged sixty-five years, a rheumatic cripple, and Jim, aged sixty-four years, a hunchbacked inebriate, and Bill, widower, aged sixty-three years, greatly hampered in his movements by the loss of both legs as a result of a slip, followed by a fall, and his only surviving daughter May Sharpe, widow, aged sixty-two years, in full possession of all her faculties with the exception of that of vision. (qtd. in Thomson 1)

The passage evokes an ambivalent response in the reader. If the tragic or deformed nature of the Lynches induces horror or pity, the comic aspect of the description makes the reader respond with amusement. As a result, there
is a clash between the content and the manner of presentation, i.e. it conjoins the gruesome or horrifying content and the comic presentation. Therefore, the effect of the passage is that of unresolved tension, a feature of the grotesque. Beckett betrays the mental grotesquerie of the characters through the portrait of their physical abnormalities.

There are occasions when a character becomes grotesque by losing even his human form as in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* that opens in the following way:

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was on his hard, as it were armor-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little, he could see his dome-like brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin, compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes. (67)

Kafka’s story presented in a realistic framework, in a realistic way, creates confusion between the sense of the comic and the horrific. In Gregor the reader visualizes a fusion of two disparate faculties. Though Gregor’s body is in the form of a monstrous insect, his mental tinkerings are those of a human being. As Thomson aptly observes, “Gregor’s matter-of-fact attitude and trivial thoughts stand in ludicrous—but somehow also terrifying—contrast to his monstrous predicament” (7).
A person may also become grotesque due to his eccentric ideas. For example, in Tobias Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*, there is a 'famous Dr L-n' who undertakes a research on the nature of stink caused by river mud as a response to a complaint about it:

He observed, that stink, or stench, meant no more than a strong impression on the olfactory nerves; and might be applied to substances of the most opposite qualities; that in the Dutch language, *stinken* signified the most agreeable perfume, as well as the most fetid odour [. . .] that he himself (the doctor) when he happened to be low-spirited, or fatigued with business, found immediate relief and uncommon satisfaction from hanging over the stale contents of a close-stool, while his servant stirred it about under his nose [. . .]. (16 -17)

The famous doctor cherishes the idea that 'stink' means only a strong impression on the olfactory nerves and it can be equally applied to mean the most agreeable perfume and to the most unpleasant odour. He puts his idea into practice at times of fatigue or low spirit by remaining very close to the stale contents of a close-stool, while his servant stirred it. Here the grotesque is achieved by ridiculing the doctor's strange idea to such an extent that it evokes disgust in the reader.

Uncanny or anxiety-arousing qualities also may turn a character into grotesque. For instance, as Thomson remarks, Mrs. Clennam in Dickens' *Little Dorrit* has nothing of the comic about her. But she is made a grotesque by using the technique of degradation or ridicule. This frightening parental
figure's narrow Calvinism is expressed in her aggression against others, especially against her son Arthur. She is a paralytic and the "paralysis is made to seem the result of her psychological condition, and thus a kind of fulfillment of an infantile, aggressive wish, the wish that the authority figures of childhood shall be punished for their thwarting of the child's desires" (Steig 259). The peculiar ambivalence of response to the grotesque is evident here; while we feel satisfaction at Mrs. Clennam's punishment, there springs at a deeper level, a feeling of guilt at our aggressive wishes toward her.

Madness comes within the purview of the grotesque as it leads to abnormal behaviour and hence insane persons are grotesques. The dignified and autocratic old King Lear, deceived by his daughters and dethroned, becomes mad. According to Wilson Knight, there is a "hideous sense of humour, at the back of tragedy" (170) that is grotesque when Lear laments: "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport" (King Lear 1V. i.36).

Sometimes a grotesque character is simultaneously ridiculous and terrifying. The Professor in The Secret Agent is an example of this sort. He is a spectacled dull little man with a feeling of complacency. His head is so thin that any one could crush it between the thumb and the forefinger. It seems that the dome of his forehead rests on the rim of the spectacles. His arrogance added to his physical deformities makes him ludicrous. He deals in explosives in the same temperament. He is driven by the ambition to make himself a perfect detonator and so he always carries a bomb to use it as he wishes.
Fusion of man and animals or inanimate things, a hallmark of the original grotesques, also can conceive grotesque characters. Conrad displays an exceptional flair for this by describing his characters using the animal imagery. In *The Secret Agent*, again, after the death of Stevie, Verloc moves around the table in the parlour “with his usual air of a large animal in a cage” (193). He exhibits the impression of “a reflective beast, not very dangerous—a slow beast with a sleek head, gloomier than a seal, and with a husky voice” (208). He “bared his teeth wolfishly” (198). By attributing bestial characteristics to Verloc, Conrad gives the readers an insight into the plausible atrocities that he may perpetrate. Other remarkable characters possessing grotesque features include Shadrack in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and Oskar Matzerath in Gunter Grass’s *The Tin Drum*.

All the above-said characters evoke ambivalent responses in the readers—comic and gruesome, sympathetic and apathetic, disconcerting and liberating. As mentioned earlier, the grotesque is ambivalently abnormal.

The grotesque may also reside in situations. In Dickens’ *Dombey and Son* Mrs. Pipchin, a grotesque caricature, has a parlour with a grotesque appearance:

> It was not, naturally, a fresh-smelling house; and in the window of the front parlour, which was never opened, Mrs. Pipchin kept a collection of plants in pots, which imparted an earthy flavour of their own to the establishment. [...] these plants were of a kind peculiarly adapted to the embowerment of Mrs. Pipchin. There were half-a-dozen specimens of the cactus, writhing round bits of
lath, like hairy serpents; another specimen shooting out broad claws, like a green lobster; several creeping vegetables, possessed of sticky and adhesive leaves; and one uncomfortable flower-pot hanging to (sic) the ceiling, which appeared to have boiled over, and tickling people underneath with its long green ends reminded them of spiders—in which Mrs. Pipchin’s dwelling was uncommonly prolific, though perhaps it challenged competition still more proudly, in the season, in point of earwigs. (88-89)

Another instance of grotesque situation is seen in Toni Morrison’s Sula. During the war in 1917, Shadrack sustained injuries and was hospitalized. When he opened his eyes, he saw a tin plate with food, and feeling hungry he looked around for his hands:

His glance was cautious at first, for he had to be very careful—anything could be anywhere. Then he noticed two lumps beneath the beige blanket on either side of his hips. With extreme care he lifted one arm and was relieved to find his hand attached to his wrist. He tried the other and found it also. Slowly he directed one hand toward the cup and, just as he was about to spread his fingers, they began to grow in higgledy-piggledy fashion like Jack’s beanstalk all over the tray and the bed. With a shriek he closed his eyes and thrust his huge growing hands under the covers. Once out of sight they seemed to shrink back to their normal size. (Morrison 8 – 9)
Shadrack’s insouciance about his own body, ‘anything could be anywhere’ evokes laughter in the reader. To everyone’s consolation, Shadrack notices his hands attached to the wrists. Nevertheless, the sudden, threatening growth of his fingers engenders some horror in the reader. As Shadrack thrusts his hand under the cover, the reader is left in anxiety. Exaggeration is the vehicle for the novelist to create the grotesque.

Nature, the wellspring of “aching joys and dizzy raptures,” can also assume a grotesque façade when human sensibilities are ascribed to it. Dickens, in *Nicholas Nickleby* presents such a nature:

> There was a sullen darkness in the sky, and the sun had gone angrily down, tinting the dull clouds with the last traces of his wrath, when the same black monk walked slowly on, with folded arms, within a stone’s-throw of the abbey. A blight had fallen on the trees and shrubs; and the wind, at length beginning to break the unnatural stillness that had prevailed all day, sighed heavily from time to time, as though foretelling in grief the ravages of the comic storm. The bat skimmed in fantastic flights through the heavy air, and the ground was alive with crawling things, whose instinct brought them forth to swell and fatten in the rain. (64 - 65)

The grotesquerie of nature is highlighted with the mention of bats and crawling creatures, the favourite creatures of the grotesque writers.

Satire, irony, parody, the bizarre, the macabre, and caricature are some complementary and contributory literary items of the grotesque and they are capable of generating situations, characters and ideas or plots with a
tinge of the grotesque. A satirist often resorts to the grotesque to evoke
disgust and derisive laughter in the readers. On the other hand, a grotesque
text aims at satire. For instance, as Thomson rightly shows, Swift utilizes the
grotesque for satiric purpose in *A Modest Proposal*. After attracting the
attention of the readers with the title, the writer presents them with a sudden
shock:

I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which
I hope will not be liable to the least objection.

I have been assured by a very knowing American of my
acquaintance in London that a young healthy child well nursed is
at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food,
whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt
that it will equally serve in a fricassee, or a ragout. [. . .] A child
will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends, and when
the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a
reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt will
be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter.

(Swift 1589 - 90)

The modest proposal—a young, healthy, well-nursed child of one year old is
a delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food—shocks the reader to the core;
at the same time it is presented in a comic way inducing tension in the
reader.

The response to this passage is always a nonplussed feeling, a mixture
of horror and mirth. The horror element does not obliterate the comic
element or vice versa. The tug of war between these two elements precipitates an unsettling effect, a tension in the readers. The grotesque is potent enough to engender both intellectual and emotional effects simultaneously. Though the readers are aware of the playful mood in Swift, it does not mitigate their horror. On the contrary, the incongruity mentioned as the comic only heightens their fear. The line that separates the grotesque from satire is that of quality. While the satirist is keen on morality, the grotesque writer does not distinguish between right and wrong or true and false; he demonstrates their inseparability.

Thomson quotes Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* as another instance of the grotesque calculatingly used for a satiric purpose. The hero of the novel makes arrangements for the 'leave taking' of a 'Loved One' in Whispering Glades:

'We had a Loved One last month who was found drowned. He had been in the ocean a month and they only identified him by his wrist-watch. They fixed that stiff,' said the hostess [ . . . ] 'so he looked like it was his wedding day. [ . . . ]'

'How will the Loved One be attired? We have our own tailoring section. [ . . . ] You see, we can fit a Loved One out very reasonably as a casket-suit does not have to be designed for hard wear and in cases where only the upper part is exposed for leave-taking there is no need for more than jacket and vest. Something dark is best to set off the flowers.' (qtd. in Thomson 46)
Waugh achieves his satiric aim of exposing the Californian ‘way of death’ with a devastating effect. Whispering Glades, its staff, and its customs appear comic and horrifying at the same time.

'Irony' is also related to the grotesque as it is a fusion of incompatibles and the ironist may draw on the grotesque occasionally. The difference between irony and the grotesque lies in the fact that while irony is “primarily intellectual” in its function and appeal, the grotesque is “primarily emotional” (Thomson 47). Irony enables the readers to make distinctions and connections intellectually, whereas the impact of the grotesque is that of a sudden shock.

Parody can be taken as a corollary of the grotesque where grotesque elements are strewn with a view to making it savagely aggressive. Similarly, grotesque writers use parodic device to render the feeling of triviality to their description; they use it sporadically, to create an overall grotesque effect. Bert Brecht’s poem “Legend of the Dead Soldier” exemplifies the relationship between parody and the grotesque. The poem written in ballad form recounts the ‘legend’ of a soldier slain in the First World War. As the Kaiser is in dire need of more men, the dead soldier is dug up from his grave and new life is infused into him. After providing adequate medical care he is led back to the battlefield in triumphant procession amidst the cheer of the local people. The poem is a ‘grotesque satire’ with parody underpinning it. The ballad, a conventional genre depicting patriotic themes, is demolished by Brecht and is made to appear grotesquely inappropriate.
In some cases it so happens that the grotesque description takes the upper hand and it overrides the satiric point. Thomson quotes from Swift’s poem “A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed” as it creates such an impression when the poet endeavours to delineate the true nature of an apparently beautiful maiden. Corinna, the pride of Drury Lane, is a much enviable woman. She reaches her bower at the midnight hour climbing four storeys. Sitting on a three-legged chair, she strips off all the artificial fittings on her body including her artificial hair:

- Now picking out a crystal eye,
- She wipes it clean, and lays it by.
- Her eyebrows from a mouse’s hide
- Stuck on with art on either side,
- Pulls off with care, and first displays ’em
- Then in a play-book smoothly lays ’em.
- Now dextrously her plumpers draws,
- That serve to fill her hollow jaws,
- Untwists a wire, and from her gums
- A set of teeth completely comes;
- Pulls out the rags contrived to prop
- Her flabby dugs, and down they drop. (qtd. in Thomson 43–44)

After reading the poem what sticks to the readers’ mind is not a vivid picture of the beauty of the maiden but as Thomson notes, “the overwhelming impression of the grotesqueness of the details” (44). The writer achieves grotesquerie in his description by yoking together the comic and terrifying elements.
The conflation of the elements of the comic and the terrific may not be proportionate as in the description of the half-witted boy Stevie’s mangled body in Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*. Stevie is the victim of the bomb explosion near the Greenwich observatory. His scattered body creates such horror in the reader that the comic answer of the constable is unable to reduce its intensity. Even Chief Inspector Heat is dumbfounded by the blood-curdling sight in the hospital when a water proof sheet is lifted off a table:

Another waterproof sheet was spread over that table in the manner of a tablecloth with the corners turned up over a sort of mound—a heap of rags, scorched and bloodstained, half concealing what might have been an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast. [. . .] A local constable in uniform cast a sidelong glance, and said with stolid simplicity:

‘He’s all there. Every bit of him. It was a job.’ (77-78)

In Joseph Heller’s *Catch – 22* also the horrific element outweighs the comic one where the pilot, McWatt, is ‘buzzing’ on a bathing beach. He examined every floating object fearfully and was ready for taking any morbid shock. Amidst the overwhelming howl of the plane’s engines, there was a soft sound. Then they saw “Kid Sampson’s two pale, skinny legs, still joined by strings somehow at the bloody truncated hips, standing stock-still on the raft.” After a few minutes they toppled backward into the water, “turned completely upside down so that only the grotesque toes and the plaster-white soles of Kid Sampson’s feet remained in view” (359).
The bizarre, which means 'very strange' or 'outlandish' also can join hands with the grotesque, though it is bereft of the disturbing quality of the grotesque. The demarcation between these two is one of degree: "The grotesque is more radical and usually more aggressive" (Thomson 32). For example, in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, there is a theory of nose that begins in an eccentric and bizarre style. The moment the theory of the nose is related to the breast, it acquires a disconcerting feeling. Sterne portrays Ambrose Paroeus as the chief surgeon and an esteemed nose-mender. He was able to convince others of his theory of the nose. He observes:

[... ] that the length and goodness of the nose was owing simply to the softness and flaccidity in the nurse's breast—as the flatness and shortness of *puisne* noses was to the firmness and elastic repulsion of the same organ of nutrition in the hale and lively—which, tho' happy for the woman, was the undoing of the child, in as much as his nose was so snubb'd, so rebuff'd, so rebated, and so refrigerated thereby [... ] but that in case of the flaccidity and softness of the nurse or mother's breast—by sinking into it, quoth *Paroeus*, as into so much butter, the nose was comforted, nourish'd, plump'd up, refresh'd, refocillated, and set growing for ever. (169-70)

The macabre and the grotesque are also related terms. Macabre, in its restricted sense means 'pertaining to death', and as a sub-form of the grotesque, in Thomson's phrase, it means "gruesome yet funny" (37).
Unlike the grotesque, the macabre lacks the balanced tension between opposites. But they can overlap as in the death scene in Gunter Grass's novel *The Tin Drum*. The dwarf hero Oskar returns his father Matzerath the latter's Nazi party pin in a cellar, when he is surrounded by his parents and Russian soldiers. Though he is least interested in seeing what his father has done with the pin, he happens to see him hiding it in his mouth. The two Ivans sitting nearby notice his movement and they thrust their tummy guns at Matzerath's belly. Oskar says:

If only he had first, with an adroit finger manoeuvre, closed the pin. As it was, he gagged, his face went purple, his eyes stood out of his head, he coughed, cried, laughed, and all this turmoil made it impossible for him to keep his hands up. [ ] He couldn’t even cough properly. He began to dance and thrash about with his arms and swept a can of Leipzig stew off the shelf. (375)

The passage evinces an intertwining of the comic and the horrific elements. The comic element, especially his dance, thrashing about with his arms, is at war with the horror of swallowing the party pin.

The grotesque is in harmony with caricature also. Caricature is "the ludicrous exaggeration of characteristic or peculiar features" (Thomson 38). A particular feature is exaggerated to the point of abnormality, which in turn evokes laughter or amusement. When the abnormality exceeds that norm, it becomes disgusting and it touches the realm of the grotesque. For example, in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Sir Andrew Aguecheek is merely a caricature, whereas Malvolio looms as grotesque in his ridiculous and
malevolent mien. Many of Dickens' characters strike us as grotesque at least on occasions: Fagin in Oliver Twist, Uriah Heep and Mr. Micawber in David Copperfield, Mrs. Pipchin in Dombey and Son, and Mrs. Clennam in Little Dorrit.

In modern German literature, the grotesque appears frequently and multifariously in the twentieth century. As in the case of Pirandello, Kayser notes that Thomas Mann's works manifest all the major elements of the grotesque, but "the mode of presentation" clouds "the purity of the grotesque" and limits its scope (158). Thomas Mann who makes frequent use of the word 'grotesque' gives the following meaning to it: "The grotesque is that which is excessively true and excessively real, not that which is arbitrary, false, irreal, and absurd" (Kayser 158).

American literature exhibits an affinity for the grotesque more than any other western literature. The American writers perceived the vast potential of the grotesque genre to reach the sublime by the gratuitous mixing of tragedy and comedy, the ludicrous and the horrible. American dream of innocence and material affluence, the World Wars, and the explosion of values and beliefs landed up the people in the nadir of despair; the sense of meaninglessness of life forged a tragi-comic vision of life. Consequently, the writers often embraced the grotesque mode in their works to interpret the nature of modern man, his fragmented self.

Sherwood Anderson inaugurated the grotesque era in American literature with the publication of his novel Winesburg, Ohio in 1919. Nathanael West, Nelson Algren, Paul Bowles, James Purdy, and James Leo Herlihy are
the other American novelists whose fictions are amenable to the grotesque. Anderson gives his view of the grotesque in his preface to *Winesburg, Ohio* which is titled "The Book of the Grotesque". The old man, the persona of the writer, speaks about innumerable truths like "the truth of virginity and the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and of poverty, of thrift and of profligacy, of carelessness and abandon. [...] It was the truths that made the people grotesques" (25). He continues that "the moment one of 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" (26). Anderson depicts a series of grotesque human beings. Wing Biddlebaum's hands, a source of his fame, make "more grotesque an already grotesque and elusive individuality" (29). Jesse Bentley is a religious grotesque who induces terror in his grandson David. The Reverend Curtis Hartman and Alice Hindman are some other religious and sexual grotesques respectively.

Nathanael West (1903–1940) is another American novelist who fashioned his novels in the matrix of the grotesque. He peoples his fictional world with the physically deformed, the mentally tortured, and the spiritually illusioned. In *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), the nameless protagonist who is identified only by his role is a remarkable grotesque. Miss Lonelyhearts, who brings consolation to desperate and sick people through newspaper columns, becomes a grotesque figure when he gives sexual gratification to others especially to his boss's wife, Mrs. Shrike, and a grotesque couple, Mr. Peter Doyle and Mrs. Doyle. His vain attempts to become a Christ figure, a
saviour, and his religious ecstasy, lead to his instantaneous death through a grotesque accident.

Nelson Algren (1909–1981) lends his stories and novels a grotesque perspective. In *A Walk on the Wild Side* (1956), many of the episodes are bizarre and the fictional world is an odd one. Dove Linkhorn, the central character, though illiterate and ingenuous, is blinded and injured in a fight. The characters take delight in brawls and in inflicting pain on others. Algren works on the defrauded and the physically grotesque. *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949) teems with petty thieves, addicts, and inebriates who are drawn towards their own death and destruction. Frankie Machine, the central character, who is an ex-soldier, card dealer, and addict, and who commits suicide with a sense of dignity to avoid death in a jail hospital is another grotesque figure.

Paul Bowles resorts to the grotesque mode in his novels *Let It Come Down* and *The Sheltering Sky*. In *Let It Come Down* (1952), the protagonist is Dyar, an amoral, unskilled and ungrateful American. He proves to be ineffectual even in his roles as a spy and a thief. His unnatural act of murdering the Arab Thami turns out to be grotesque as Dyar kills him by hitting a nail into his ear.

James Purdy is another creator of the grotesque. Like Faulkner, Purdy believes that “the sublime lurks within the grotesque” (W.V.O’Connor 16). Grotesque characters produce grotesque situations through their grotesque behaviour in his story “63: Dream Place”. The two West Virginian boys—Fenton and Claire—who make a living in New York City are grotesques, the
former morally and the latter physically. Fenton, a homosexual and an adulterer, in a paroxysm of disparate feelings of bitterness and tenderness, stifles his sick and effete brother Claire who stands in his way of pleasure, and leaves the house. After many days, when he returns home, Fenton realizes that he has killed his beloved brother. Anyway, he decides to bury him in an old chest he finds in the attic, though it is not a fit resting place.

The burial scene presents a grotesque situation:

> It took him all night to get himself ready to carry Claire up, as though once he had put him in the chest, he was really at last dead forever. For part of the night he found that he had fallen asleep over Claire’s body, and at the very end before he carried him upstairs and deposited him, he forced himself to kiss the dead stained lips he had stopped, and said, ‘Up we go then, motherfucker’. (qtd. in W.V.O’Connor 17)

Fenton’s falling asleep over his dead brother’s body, his self-forced kiss on Claire’s lips, and his address to Claire as ‘motherfucker’ are occasions of the macabre touching the realm of the grotesque.

James Leo Herlihy is also an advocate of the grotesque. In his collection of stories entitled *The Sleep of Baby Filberstone*, Baby Filberstone is depicted as a physical and psychological grotesque. Filberstone has a huge Falstaffian body weighing over 200 pounds and his main preoccupation is to pilfer his mother’s phenobarbitals so that he can lie down to sleep like a giant foetus.
A substantial part of the American grotesque writing is the contribution of the South. Erskine Caldwell, William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, and Walker Percy are the main Southern masters of the grotesque. The loss of the Civil War diminished agricultural production leading to poverty and abnormality and lack of sufficient code for living filled the people with a feeling of dislocation and ennui. Hence the writers fictionalized the condition of modern man in grotesque terms.

William Faulkner (1897–1962) employs the grotesque in an adroit manner in his two books _The Sound and the Fury_ (1929) and _As I Lay Dying_ (1930). _The Sound and the Fury_, set in Faulkner’s partly imaginary Yoknapatawpha county in Mississippi, relates the story of the dissolution of the last generation of the Compson family. The story with four portraits is focused on the Compson children—Jason, the businessman of the family; Quentin, the neurotic lover of his sister Candace, with a strong sense of family honour and pride; promiscuous Candace, and Benji, the idiot boy. Dilsey, the old Negro woman servant functions as the binding force of the members of the family. All the Compson children are grotesques either physically or mentally.

Erskine Caldwell (1903–1987) portrays the physically grotesque like the hare-lipped Ellie May in _Tobacco Road_ (1932). Sister Bessie Rice in the same novel is another grotesque character, a self-ordained woman evangelist with a boneless nose, who announces that God has asked her to
many Dude, a feckless sixteen-year-old boy. Caldwell uses the grotesque for the purpose of low comedy.

Robert Penn Warren (1905–1989) is still another writer from the South who gives grotesque expression in his novels to delineate man's longing for spiritual refulgence. Warren shows how even votaries of rationality and idealism may turn into grotesque figures by committing perfidies as his Jeremiah Beaumont in *World Enough and Time* (1950) which is set in Kentucky. Knowing that his friend and benefactor Colonel Cassius Fort has seduced Rachel Jordan with whom Jeremiah has lived for sometime, Jeremiah professes to avenge her honour. When Fort refuses to challenge his 'adopted son' to a duel, Jeremiah murders him in cold blood. Sentenced to death, he is joined in the cell by Rachel. Just before the hour of their execution, they are rescued and sent to a distant swamp near the Mississippi. As days pass, Rachel loses her mind and commits suicide. He resolves to expiate his guilt by confessing it. Unfortunately, on the way, he is murdered by Jenkins and his chopped head is carried to Frankfurt where Rachel's body is also brought for burial. It is Jeremiah's fanaticism for pure idea that causes his death by making him a grotesque figure.

Eudora Welty is another Southern writer who exploited the grotesque device in her early works. Many of the characters in Welty's collection of stories *A Curtain of Green* (1941) and *The Wide Net* (1943) are eccentrics. The protagonists of “Petrified Man”, “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies”, and “Clytie” are presented as grotesques to draw attention to the social and psychological state of women. By manipulating animal and inanimate
imagery Welty clarifies the situation. In “Lily Daw and Three Ladies”, Aimee doubts which is more terrible, “the man (or) the hissing train” and as “the bell began to ring hollowly and the man was talking” the Ladies cluck their tongues and made noises “sad as the soft noises in the hen houses at twilight” (5). Her story “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden” is an exquisite example of the grotesque, where Little Lee Roy, the club-footed little nigger, picked up by a travelling show company, is forced to act as an Indian maiden biting off chicken necks and eating its raw meat.

Carson McCullers (1917–1967) is a consummate artist of the grotesque. Her skill in portraying grotesque characters is evident from her very first novel The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (1940), a story of two deaf mutes, Spiros Antonapoulos and John Singer. They live in the cocoon of loneliness. “The two mutes had no other friends,” and they were “alone so much that nothing ever disturbed them” (3). Antonapoulos’ grotesquerie is evident in his physical appearance, he is an “obese and dreamy Greek” with round, oil face, “half-closed eyelids and lips that curved in a gentle, stupid smile” (1). When he kneeled, his “huge buttocks would sag down over his plump little feet” (4). His grotesquerie is confined not only to his physical appearance but it is reflected in his behaviour too. He preferred eating to anything else in the world. After the meals, “the big Greek would lie back on his sofa and slowly lick over each one of his teeth with his tongue” (3). He is prone to such eccentricities as pilfering food items like candies from the fruit store of his cousin, Charles Parker. He develops the habit of stealing lumps of sugar, peppershakers or silverware from restaurants, and urinating in
public against the wall of the First National Bank Building. He often bumps into people and attacks those persons whose faces displease him. Time and again, he is arrested on charges of theft, of committing public indecencies, of assault and battery. Once he stays in jail as Singer fails to stand bail for him.

Antonapoulos' grotesquerie is a pointer to the mental grotesquerie of his inability to love. At home Singer talks a lot to Antonapoulos with eager face and brightly sparkled eyes, shaping the words in designs with his hands. But lying indolently, Antonapoulos scarcely speaks. He moves his hands only to apprise Singer of his needs like eating, drinking or sleeping. At the news of Charles Parker's decision to send Antonapoulos to the far away state insane asylum, Singer strains to drive home all his thoughts to Antonapoulos by talking with his hands without a pause. Nevertheless, Antonapoulos merely watches him drowsily betraying his lovelessness and lack of perception. At the bus station, Singer watches him through the window and his hands make swift moves in his attempt to talk to his friend for the last time. But Antonapoulos pays no attention to him busying himself with checking over the items in his lunch box. Finally, he offers a "bland and remote" smile to Singer "as though already they were many miles apart" (7). Antonapoulos is a representative of modern man who is eager to exploit others for his own selfishness without reciprocating his love. V.S. Carr observes that to McCullers "it was love, 'especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it,' that lay at the heart of her selection of grotesque figures with whom she peopled much of her fictional landscape" (39).
Though Singer is not so grotesque as Antonapoulos in his mental disposition, his loneliness deepens after the departure of his friend and it reaches its nadir on the death of Antonapoulos. He who has talked eloquently with his hands, now keeps his hands thrust in his pockets. His hands become a torment to him. They move restlessly even in his sleep. Though he acts as a source of solace and a friend to people like Biff Brannon, Jake Blount, Doctor Copeland, and Mick Kelly, he cannot unfold his heart to them as he is still emotionally attached to Antonapoulos. Therefore, the news of his friend’s death is something he cannot put up with. His mental grotesquerie comes to light in his suicide at the news of his friend’s death.

Besides these two deaf-mutes who are grotesques, the readers come across some other grotesques. Jake Blount, the radical agitator who claims of working for the amelioration of the Whites, is surely a grotesque. There were many things that seemed contrary in him: “His head was very large and well-shaped, but his neck was soft and slender as a boy’s. The mustache looked false, as if it had been stuck on for a costume party and would fall off if he talked too fast” (12). He had huge, stained and calloused hands. Blount makes himself grotesque through his inebriation, ranting and raving. After getting out of Brennon’s cafe, he makes a grotesque scene by putting his head against the side of the brick wall, hitting with his fists and fighting. His grotesque behaviour alienates him further from the society. McCullers continues her art of grotesquerie in her other novels too. As Louis D. Rubin remarks, McCullers uses grotesquerie “not to provoke amusement but to
convey the sense of loneliness and isolation that comes with abnormality” (Curious Death of Novel 242).

Flannery O’Connor is a superb artist of the grotesque who manipulates her lurid tales to create moments of grace in an absurd, topsy-turvy world. Her “radical redefinition of the Incarnation” says Anthony Di Renzo, “the human as divine is at the heart of her grotesque art.” Her characters “achieve faith only after they have desecrated the trappings of conventional religion” (42). Her novel Wise Blood (1949) and her story “Parker’s Back” illustrate this fact.

The central figure in Wise Blood is Hazel Motes who has a grotesque profile. He has a nose like “shrike’s bill” and “a long vertical crease on either side of his mouth” (FOCW 3-4). Driven by the ambition of becoming a prophet, he buys an Essex, and moves about the city of Taulkinham preaching a new church “the church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified” (31) with indefatigable enthusiasm. He proclaims that blasphemy is the only way to the truth whether one understands it or not. His moral depravity prods him to declare that he has no need of Jesus as he has his whore, Leora Watts. While sitting in his car he gets a grotesque dream:

[H]e dreamed he was not dead but only buried. He was not waiting on the Judgment because there was no Judgment, he was waiting on nothing. Various eyes looked through the back oval window at his situation, some with considerable reverence [. . .]. There were three women with paper sacks who looked at him critically as if he were something—a piece of fish—they might
buy, but they passed on after a minute. A man in a canvas hat looked in and put his thumb to his nose and wiggled his fingers. Then a woman with two little boys on either side of her stopped and looked in, grinning. After a second, she pushed the boys out of view and indicated that she would climb in and keep him company for a while, but she couldn’t get through the glass and finally she went off. (FOCW 91-92)

Hazel Motes’ dream of being buried before death and his waiting on nothing exhibit the macabre in the dream. He loses even his humanity when he becomes ‘a piece of fish’ for the onlookers. His grotesque condition—spiritual emptiness, utter alienation, and hopelessness—gets reflected in his dream.

It is Motes’ iron-fisted approach to the patrolmen that bludgeons them into smashing his car by pushing it down from the top of the hill. Becoming desperate, he commits the grotesque action of blinding his eyes with quicklime.

Readers experience Motes’ grotesque conversion through his penances such as wearing shoes which are “lined with rocks” (FOCW 129) and having “three strands of barbed wire, wrapped around his chest” (FOCW 126). Though he brooks no compromise with Jesus in the beginning, he imbibes the Christian spirit and identifies with Jesus through suffering.

The story creates a grotesque effect on the readers when Mrs. Flood converses with the corpse of Hazel Motes, taking him to be alive: “I knew
you’d come back,” she said. “And I’ve been waiting for you. And you needn’t to pay any more rent but have it free here, any way you like, upstairs or down. Just however you want it and with me to wait on you, or if you want to go on somewhere, we’ll both go.” (FOCW131).

“Parker’s Back” is a classic example of O’Connor’s grotesque mode. Parker is a man who has become obsessed with tattoos since the age of fourteen. This obsession turns him into a grotesque person because the only reason for his doing any work was to pay for more tattoos. His whole body except his back is adorned with tattoos of diverse things: eagle, serpent, cards, hearts pierced with arrows, tiger, panther, hawks, and people like Elizabeth II and Philip. Whenever he gets an opportunity to get a big mirror he will examine his overall appearance. The effect is “not of one intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched” (FOCW659). He always obviates his indisposition by having new tattoos. The tattoos begin to penetrate his skin and change his character; he takes to drinking and fighting.

Finally, to ingratiate himself with his wife, Parker gets a tattoo of “the haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes” on his back (FOCW667). Contrary to his expectation, when he reaches home, his wife welcomes him with a broom. He endures the thrashings raising no objection and finally he is found crying like a baby leaning against the pecan tree. A grotesque conversion takes place in him and he becomes a parody of crucified Christ.
Melissa Hines in the essay “Grotesque Conversions and Critical Piety” observes that “Parker’s Back” contains “a marvelous telescoping of the whole history of the term ‘grotesque’.” The central motif of the tattoos reminds us of the very image of the origin of the mode and the term in architectural decoration. “But by transferring that specific type of decoration to adornment of the human body, O’Connor changes it into a ‘grotesque’ phenomenon—repulsive, unnatural, slightly ridiculous—in that pejorative sense that most of us would assign the term” (26).

It is this grotesque art that becomes an instrument of grace for Parker. As Hines argues, for O’Connor even the ridiculous and unlikely things in the world can be metamorphosed into objects of mysterious grace: “It is with this positive transformation that she makes her ultimate assault on our tendency toward intellectual pride and complacency” (32). Through her grotesque characters and stories O’Connor underlines her theme, that is, a world without faith in God is “inevitably full of evil” and can be “redeemed only by its conversion to Christianity” (Ming 57). O’Connor’s influence on Percy is evident in “the linguistic coincidence of opposites; the jeremiad against contemporary secularism; the comic, grotesque exaggeration that covers a deeply theological subject matter; and perhaps, most importantly, the symbolism that emerges from a sacramental sense of the world” (Gretlund and Westarp 227).

Walker Percy (1916–1990) joins hands with the other Southern writers in forging grotesque novels. Like O’Connor, Percy also explores “violence, shock, and bizarre comedy as viable modes of serious Christian
communication” (Hawkins 59). Consequently, he realized the strength of the grotesque mode to describe the “absurdity of human existence and the nausea of life in the twentieth century” (*Message in the Bottle* 5). All his novels betray streaks of the grotesque in different degrees in terms of characterization, incident, situation and imagery. Like O’Connor and Carson McCullers, Percy is a modern writer who is in search of new literary structures “and in the twisted features of the Grotesque the Modernist writer discerned disjunctive forms capable of reflecting the fragmentation and alienation of the modern world” (Millichap 339).

By using the term grotesque in the first part of his first novel *The Moviegoer* (1961), Percy makes a subsequent application of the same in the succeeding novels, though he hardly repeats the term in other novels. Speaking about Uncle Jules, who is at lunch, Binx observes, “It is hard to believe anything is wrong; the bottles in particular seem grotesque” (30). Percy’s novels are his ‘message in the bottles’; the bottles have a grotesque form.