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# Contemporary Horrors: Reimagining the Grotesque in British Fiction

## Çağdaş Dönem Korkuları: İngiliz Kurgusunda Groteskin Yeniden Tasavvur Edilmesi

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**ABSTRACT**
This study investigates the representation of the grotesque tradition in three contemporary British novels: William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory* (1984), and Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013). The study posits that the grotesque functions as an essential tool to voice dissatisfaction with the cultural climate at the time of their writing, explicitly comparing how the sources of the grotesque have shifted across this sixty-year span. It explores how these novels dismantle classical artistic qualities, namely, aesthetic qualities depicting beauty holding flawless harmony, symmetry, statics and proportion, presenting them as binary opposites to grotesque art. A key aspect is the interrelation of grotesque terminology with the critical term bricolage, arguing that the grotesque tradition positively serves Viktor Shklovsky's defined "purpose of art." The analysis delves into physical grotesque representations, hybridity, ambivalence, monstrosity, inversion, carnivalesque elements (particularly excrement), the abject, the uncanny effect, and narrative shock mechanisms. By creating bricolage portraits of the modern world, these novels use grotesque imagery to depict the fragmented, alienated, uncanny, sceptical, and insecure feelings of the contemporary individual, reflecting the pervasive pessimism of the era.

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## Introduction

The tradition of the grotesque, with its roots tracing back to prehistoric times, serves as a powerful lens through which to examine shifting societal perceptions and discontents. Initially a term associated with unique and bizarre art discovered in ancient Roman chambers, the grotesque has evolved into a critical concept applicable across various artistic forms, including literature. This study undertakes an examination of the grotesque tradition as represented in three contemporary British novels published between 1954 and 2013: William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory* (1984), and Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013). These works, composed across a span of approximately six decades, demonstrate the enduring relevance and evolving application of the grotesque in British fiction. The central premise of this study is that these novels employ the grotesque as a critical tool to articulate a profound sense of dissatisfaction with the prevailing social, political, and cultural atmospheres in which they were written. By highlighting inconsistencies, contradictions, and disturbances, the grotesque challenges conventional norms and exposes underlying societal ills. The novels reflect the pessimistic atmosphere of their respective times, shaped by events like World War II, the threat of global conflict, and economic crises. This pessimism is manifested through the pervasive use of grotesque imagery and themes.

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The investigation is guided by several key critical concepts. Central to the argument is the application of the grotesque as a mechanism for social satire and reader awakening. The study explores how the grotesque creates a "shock mechanism" (Ordu, 2024, pp. 3-8, 16, 33, 80) in the reader – echoing Wolfgang Kayser's foundational view of the grotesque as an "AN ATTEMPT TO INVOKE AND SUBDUE THE DEMONIC ASPECTS OF THE WORLD" (1981, p. 188, his capitals) – aiming to disrupt apathy towards the world's degradations, which is clarified by Kayser as the "reader [being] affected by the incomprehensibility of the phenomenal world which is strange and dreamlike" (1981, p. 147). This shock aligns with Viktor Shklovsky's concept of "defamiliarization" or "bestrangement" (1962, p. 52), where the purpose of art is explained to prevent automated perception and to force the reader to notice and engage with the world in new ways. By presenting the familiar in an unfamiliar or distorted manner, the grotesque compels the reader to break free from habitual understanding and critically re-evaluate their perceptions.

Another crucial theoretical lens is the concept of "bricolage," borrowed from Claude Lévi-Strauss. While Lévi-Strauss applied bricolage to anthropology, this study adopts it as a critical tool for literary analysis. Bricolage, in this context, involves taking "the means at hand" (Derrida, 1978, p. 285) in Derrida's terms and combining disparate elements – ideas, concepts, or even narrative styles – to create something new. This study analyses "narrative bricolage" and "identity bricolage," two interrelated but analytically separate modes through which the novels construct meaning. Drawing on Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) explanation, this study specifically applies narrative bricolage which can be defined as a strategy of "montage" (p. 16) or "quilt-making" (p. 16) – to examine how these novels utilize non-linear timelines with flashbacks and flashforwards, and hybrid genres, which rejects strict classification. Similarly, identity bricolage operates at the level of character construction. In *The Wasp Factory*, Frank's identity is not innate or stable but assembled from biological intervention, hormonal manipulation, physical mutilation, paternal scientific intervention and fabricated narratives of masculinity imposed by paternal authority. The grotesque itself can be seen as a form of bricolage, combining incongruous elements to produce a jarring effect. Likewise, the hybrid qualities of the Hempstock women who possess animate and inanimate qualities are forms of identity bricolage. The novels under study deconstruct and reconstruct stereotypical conceptions and established norms, presenting a "bricolage portrait" (Ordu, 2024, p. 172) of the modern world that is often devoid of harmony and defies reader expectations. This aligns with the idea that there can be "several solutions to the same problem" (Strauss, 1966, p. 24), challenging monolithic perspectives.

Furthermore, Sigmund Freud's concept (1919) of "the uncanny" (*das Unheimliche*) is significant. The uncanny arises when something familiar appears in an unfamiliar context or form, triggering anxiety (Freud, 1976, pp. 1-2). The grotesque, through its blend of the familiar and the strange, often produces an uncanny effect, disturbing the reader and contributing to the overall sense of unease in the novels. This disturbance is heightened by narrative techniques that break traditional literary conventions, such as using graphic language, presenting unpopular characters, and employing non-linear structures.

The study also engages with other relevant critical concepts, including Hélène Cixous's notion of "the death of the hero" (1974, p. 386) and Brian Phillips's discussion of "the decline of character" (2004, p. 636) in contemporary fiction reading both through Viktor Shklovsky's principle of defamiliarization. The absence of easily identifiable or admirable heroes in these novels is linked to Shklovsky's defamiliarization technique, because it is claimed that the reader is unable to fully identify with characters as they are unsympathetic ones and this fact keeps the reader critically focused. By presenting "unpopular characters" that the reader cannot identify with, the authors prevent the reader from becoming "emotionally automated," forcing them to remain critically distant and observant of the horror. Mikhail Bakhtin's work on "grotesque realism" (1984, pp. 18-21) and the "carnivalesque" (1984, p. 400) is also vital, particularly his ideas about the inversion of hierarchies, debasement, and the polyphonic nature of the novel. While Bakhtin's

carnivalesque often implies a sense of renewal, the grotesque in contemporary literature, as explored here, tends towards pessimism and catastrophe. Julia Kristeva's concept of "abjection" (1982, pp. 1, 4, 12-15), dealing with the human response to the impure and repulsive, provides a framework for understanding characters and elements that challenge conventional notions of purity and order.

This study addresses a scholarly gap by specifically examining the interplay between the grotesque, bricolage, the uncanny effect, and Shklovsky's "purpose of art" within the context of contemporary British fiction. While these concepts have been explored individually or in different combinations, their collective application to these specific novels offers a novel perspective on how modern authors utilize the grotesque to comment on societal anxieties and human nature. The methodology involves a close textual analysis of the three selected novels, identifying and interpreting the representation of grotesque elements. The analysis proceeds by first discussing physical manifestations of the grotesque, then exploring critical qualities like hybridity and ambivalence, and finally examining the narrative techniques that create the shock mechanism and uncanny effect. The study also considers the historical and socio-political contexts of the novels to understand how the grotesque reflects the specific discontents of their time. In essence, this study aims to provide an insightful analysis of how *Lord of the Flies*, *The Wasp Factory*, and *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* utilize the grotesque to mirror a perceived degradation in humanity and society, challenge complacent perceptions, and engage the reader in a critical re-evaluation of the world. The grotesque is presented not merely as an aesthetic choice, but as a deliberate and potent "aggressive weapon" (Thomson, 1972, p. 58) wielded by authors to awaken an apathetic audience to the uncomfortable realities of the modern era.

## Discussion

This study investigates grotesque representations in Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Banks's *The Wasp Factory*, and Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, arguing that grotesque imagery functions as a critical device – alongside Lévi-Strauss's bricolage and Freud's uncanny – to disrupt habitual perception, fulfil Shklovsky's aesthetic purpose, and satirize sociocultural norms by leveraging hybridity, ambivalence, and monstrosity within their historical contexts.

### *The Grotesque in Literature: A Theoretical Reappraisal*

This part lays the theoretical groundwork for the study's analysis, defining the key concepts of "the uncanny," "bricolage," and "grotesque" and exploring their interrelationship, particularly in the context of Viktor Shklovsky's explanation of "the purpose of art." It is argued that these critical terms share common denominators such as shock, defamiliarization, and alienation, which form the core of the study's argument. The concept of Viktor Shklovsky's "purpose of art" is central. Shklovsky (1895-1984), a Russian Formalist, introduced the terms "defamiliarization" and "bestrangement" in his work titled "Art as Technique" (1965). According to Shklovsky, human perception tends to become "automatized"; we merely recognize familiar objects or events without truly noticing them. This process, which he names "automization" (1965, p. 13), can lead us to neglect important aspects of life. To counteract this, Shklovsky argues, art must make the familiar unfamiliar again – to "defamiliarize" or "bestrange" it. He posits that "The purpose of art ... is to force us to notice" (1965, p. 36). Art employs various techniques to impede perception, making the perception slower and producing a greater effect. Contemporary British fiction, as analysed in this study, often attempts to disturb the reader and break this automation through graphic language, uncensored narratives, and the creation of unpopular characters that the reader cannot easily identify with. The continuous disapproval the reader feels towards these characters is seen as one element that keeps them engaged and awake throughout the text.

Sigmund Freud's analytical term "the uncanny" (*Das Unheimliche*), first discussed in his article entitled "The Uncanny," is another crucial concept. The uncanny effect, often described as unsettling or strangely familiar, is explored in literature. Freud referenced works like E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman* to illustrate this effect, noting its presence in phenomena like automata, wax figures, and the omnipresence of eyes. The study connects the uncanny effect to

the idea of something repressed that returns, something familiar made unfamiliar or strange. This feeling of being "not at home" (Yaeri, 2015, p. 152) or alienated is seen as a characteristic of the modern individual.

The third key concept is Claude Lévi-Strauss's critical term "bricolage." Lévi-Strauss explains bricolage through the figure of the "bricoleur" – essentially, someone who uses "the means at hand," employing instruments already available around them (Derrida, 1978, p. 285). The concept of bricolage has gained widespread popularity and has been adopted in numerous fields, from economics to social sciences and qualitative research. As described by critics like Yee and Bremner (2011), and Denzin and Lincoln (2011), bricolage involves combining methods, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers to create a model of inquiry that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth. It helps researchers "respect the complexity of meaning-making processes and the contradictions of the lived world" (Rogers, 2012, p. 4). Bricolage can also function politically by encouraging multiple perspectives. In literature, bricolage offers a new perspective for analysis by deconstructing and reconstructing a text using available pieces, recognizing that there can be "several solutions to the same problem" (Strauss, 1966, p. 24). It is frequently linked to postmodern literature because it questions established ideas of authorship and originality, emphasizing that texts are created through appropriation, recontextualization, and recombination. This process allows writers to create works reflecting the richness and diversity of the literary and cultural world.

The study's main argument regarding bricolage is that the grotesque is the bricolage of the contemporary British novel. It argues that works possess grotesque elements like exaggeration, monstrosity, and ambivalence, empowered by the bricolage technique, to deconstruct and reconstruct earlier myths and stereotypes. For instance, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* creates a bricolage by purposefully dismantling the Victorian archetypes established by fictional works pioneered by *The Coral Island*, shattering the myth that British identity is synonymous with inherent "gentlemanliness," "nobility," and "democracy." By isolating his characters, Golding proves that these traits are not biological constants but fragile social constructs, offering a bleak re-evaluation of national identity. In a similar vein of subversion, Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factory* destabilizes entrenched binaries such as "male versus female," "innocent versus evil," and the traditional definitions of "sex and gender." Banks forces the reader to confront the inadequacy of these historical labels, leaving the audience in a state of profound uncertainty. Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* further advances this literary deconstruction by forming a narrative bricolage out of the fragmented concepts of "the sacred family," "femininity," "witchcraft," and "parental protection." Through this process of dismantling and reassembling definitions in a seemingly chaotic fashion, these works mirror the existential crisis of the contemporary individual. The resulting sense of "the uncanny" leaves the modern subject in a state of perpetual hesitation and doubt – ultimately portraying the human condition as one of isolation, impotence, and poignant desperation in a world devoid of stable certainties. This article examines the historical and conceptual framework of the grotesque. Originating from Italian art found in the ruins of Nero's house (64-68 CE), the term "grottesca" referred to figures found in "grottoes" or caves (Barasch, 1971, p. 13; Kayser, 1963, p. 19; Harpham, 2006, pp. 31-32). These early grotesque images, dating back to 3000 BC, often depicted hybrid figures combining human and animal forms. When the term was adopted in English, it carried meanings associated with "chimera," "demon," "fool," and "clown" (Barasch, 1971, pp. 81-82). Early English attitudes towards the grotesque varied, from uncritical acceptance to recognizing it as a style combining natural and unnatural elements or simply using it as an ornamental technique. The study focuses on the second form – where ambivalence and hybridity are created by combining paradoxical pieces to create a shock effect. William D'Avenant is noted as the first writer in England to use the term "grotesques" for fantastic characters in literature (Barasch, 1971, p. 82).

Key characteristics of the grotesque highlighted include its capacity to make the familiar unfamiliar, the beautiful ugly, and the natural unnatural. It often involves a paradoxical situation where an ugly character might have a virtuous personality or vice versa, leading to hesitation in

the reader between attraction and repulsion. Grotesque figures display qualities like being unusual, bizarre, distorted, hybrid, unfinished, deformed, ambivalent, monstrous, ignoble, insane, or immoral. It frequently presents a mixture of two or more different elements, such as real and surreal, evil and innocent, or childish and mature qualities in a body or setting. Walter Scott connects the grotesque to "arabesque" (1838, p. 359), seeing both as involving heterogeneous elements and the monstrous. While the grotesque originated as a visual art form (painting, sculpture, architecture), its analysis in literature depends on the authors' descriptive language to evoke vivid visual images perceived as grotesque. Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the novel and the grotesque, particularly his concept of the carnivalesque and heteroglossia, is also introduced. Bakhtin describes the novel as a dialogic and polyphonic genre characterized by a multiplicity of competing speech patterns, registers, and social voices ("heteroglossia"), contrasting it with the monophonic nature of other genres (1984, p. 400). He sees the novel as a "young" and "developing," "anarchic" genre that gets on poorly with others (pp. 3-6). This deconstructive, polyphonic quality of the novel is seen as having affinities with the grotesque. The carnivalesque is defined as an effective critique of society's norms, a source of dialogic where no single voice holds supremacy and involves the suspension of hierarchical precedence. Bakhtin also highlights the "material bodily principle" (p. 18) in Rabelais, involving images of the human body and its functions (food, drink, defecation), which pulls towards the more realistic and "downward" (earth) rather than the "upward" (heaven) (pp. 19-21). These carnivalesque elements, like degradation, are linked to the grotesque.

It is established that the grotesque, bricolage, and the uncanny are interconnected concepts that share the goal of disturbing and awakening the reader. The grotesque, as the "bricolage" of the contemporary novel, deconstructs stereotypes and uses shock and alienation to force the reader to notice the world's degraded state, thereby fulfilling Shklovsky's "purpose of art." The novel genre, with its inherent hybrid and dialogic qualities, is seen as a suitable vehicle for the grotesque tradition.

## Reflections of Horror: The Grotesque as Mirror in *Lord of the Flies*

This part applies the theoretical framework established in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954). The section aims to demonstrate the parallels between the characteristics of grotesque literature and the social and political background of the novel, arguing that the novel forms a bricolage that deconstructs and reconstructs stereotypical conceptions of childhood and innocence, particularly those found in earlier children's adventure novels like R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1857). Golding, a Nobel Prize winner and WWII veteran, unabashedly reflected the brutal reality of war and human nature, juxtaposing the violence of war with the innocence of children. The novel was written against the backdrop of the pessimistic atmosphere following WWII and the fear of a potential new global war.

The representation of grotesque imagery and the shock mechanism triggered by these images through concepts like hybridity, ambivalence, monstrosity, and carnivalesque are discussed here. It discusses the post-war pessimism that challenged the notion of human nobility. Golding creates a bricolage from the deconstructed pieces of earlier "noble" conceptions, particularly the "British pride" prevalent in novels like *The Coral Island*. In *The Coral Island*, the characters' superiority is linked to being British. Golding challenges this, presenting British schoolboys who descend into savagery. He creates hybrid characters who are noble and innocent in form; however, ignoble and savage in action which comes to climax when Jack and his team start howling like animals in a "man hunt" to kill their friends, commit three murders on the island start dancing and masking practices after their murders like primitive tribes. In similar vein, in *The Wasp Factory* Frank's hybridity strikes attention. He is officially non-existent opposed to his physical being; lives within the dilemma of being Frank and Frances, that is, male and female; belongs to a family and is desolate at the same time; is in a crowd of memories and memorials and is alone in that crowd. In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* the hybrid characteristics of the Hempstock women having animate and inanimate qualities at the same time, the child character is in the dilemma of finding refugee outside rather than within the family, mother character who

is away and changed by the caregiver who is a witch but closer to the child create the hybrid qualities in the novels. Different from the classical definition of the hybrid, these characters are human beings who have paradoxical qualities created by postmodern world.

Golding's *Lord of the Flies* embodies Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque not merely by depicting chaos, but by suspending established hierarchies and inverting social roles, allowing what is normally repressed to erupt. The election of a "chief," a mock parody of political order, signals this initial inversion, but it is during the frenzied pig hunts and the dance around Simon's death that carnival reaches its grotesque climax. These scenes embody the spirit of what critics have called "the world turned upside down" (Crawford, 2002), a phrase often used to characterize Bakhtin's notion of carnivalesque: a temporary space where law, decorum, and hierarchy are suspended, and repressed instincts erupt, which is further explained by Vurmay as "derogation or lowering of the high and the lofty" (2019, p. 175). The children's regression into savagery is not just random violence, but a form of ritualistic release, akin to carnival's temporary suspension of societal norms. Jack's transformation from a disciplined choirboy to a painted, howling leader of a violent tribe reveals the grotesque ambivalence at the heart of the carnivalesque – where the sacred and the profane, the child and the beast, coexist and collapse into one another.

Similarly, grotesque hybridity, as theorized by Wolfgang Kayser, emerges most powerfully in the contradictory images of innocence and brutality. The image of English schoolboys – symbols of imperial order and childhood purity – wielding spears and chanting in ritualistic ecstasy is grotesque precisely because it fuses two incompatible realities. This is not mere irony, but a productive collision of cultural codes that de-familiarizes the reader's assumptions about children, civilization, and moral certainty. The hybrid genre of the novel – combining dystopia, fable, satire, and psychological horror – mirrors this thematic hybridity, resisting any singular interpretation or genre containment. The grotesque thus becomes both an aesthetic strategy and a philosophical lens through which Golding critiques the fragility of so-called civilized values.

The island setting, detached from the outside world, contributes to the grotesque qualities by allowing the boys' underlying nature to emerge. The novel is presented as a story about a group of young boys isolated on an island who build norms but inevitably become aggressive and vicious in the absence of civilizing adults. Golding, though claiming to be an optimist, depicts a decidedly unoptimistic view in *Lord of the Flies*, which the study argues helps convey his intended message.

Physical grotesque imagery is observable such as the pig's head and the parachute man. The boys' fear and their inconsistent, bizarre descriptions of the mysterious "Beast" creates incongruity. This chaos in their perception is linked to the horror and insecurity on the island, exacerbated by the backdrop of World War II. This resonates with Wolfgang Kayser's descriptions of grotesque art as inexplicable, incomprehensible, ridiculous, and horrible. The parachute man is ultimately revealed to be a physical manifestation of human evil and the remnants of war that have reached the island. Golding's evocative language and detailed descriptions of this figure sitting on the mountain make the inexplicable dread have a tangible, horrifying source. This misrecognition reflects not only a grotesque distortion of reality but also the way fear, in the absence of rational structures, becomes mythologized. Marina Warner insightfully notes that "[fear] describes three of the principal methods of coping with anxieties grounded in common experience, as well as the nameless terrors that come in the dark and assail the mind… [Bogeys] materialize fear in some kind of living shape" (1998, p. 10). The Beast in *Lord of the Flies* functions precisely as such a "bogey" – an amorphous, culturally constructed manifestation of collective anxiety, shaped by war, childhood uncertainty, and the breakdown of social order.

The carnivalesque elements in the novel, drawing on Bakhtin's concept of the suspension of hierarchical precedence during carnival time is also critical. Unlike official feasts, carnival allows for frank and free speech and gesture. The island environment, lacking societal rules and

traditional adult teachings, becomes a space where the children are freed from dogmatism and piety and tend to degrade themselves. The study discusses three models of carnivalesque practice: the distortion of adult/child responsibilities, the dehumanization of people through attacking nature/animals, and the critique of the "civilized" versus "savage" dichotomy. The election of the chief is seen as an application of the carnivalesque inversion of social status. Crawford's view of the novel's "noncelebratory, violent, and fascistic carnivalesque behaviour" (2008, p. 104) is also important. The novel supports the idea of the world being turned upside down, where rules are forgotten and repressed desires enacted. Piggy's insistence on rules and British superiority highlights the tension between the desire for order and the descent into chaos. Ralph, Jack, and Piggy each express a belief in British identity as a stabilizing force, yet these convictions become grotesquely ironic in the face of their eventual descent into savagery. Early in the novel, Ralph reassures the group with a childlike assertion of imperial authority: "My father's in the Navy. He said there aren't any unknown islands left. He says the Queen has a big room full of maps … So the Queen's got a picture of this island" (Golding, 1996, p. 51). This naive confidence in British power and global control reflects an idealized notion of civilization as orderly, mapped, and inherently good. Jack echoes this sentiment when he asserts, "We're English, and the English are best at everything. So we've got to do the right things" (Golding, 1996, p. 55). Here, national identity is directly tied to moral superiority and rational behaviour. Yet Jack, who begins as a choir leader, ultimately becomes the figurehead of chaos, violence, and ritualistic brutality. The grotesque tension between their civilized self-image and their monstrous behaviour becomes most visible through Piggy's desperate plea: "Which is better – to have rules and agree, or to hunt and kill?" (Golding, 1996, p. 222). Delivered shortly before his brutal death, this line underscores the collapse of logic and civility under the weight of primal instinct.

The grotesque lies not only in the violence but in the jarring contradiction between these boys' civilized upbringing and their dehumanized actions. Their invocations of British pride and rationality serve as a distorted mirror of the world they left behind – a world that, in Golding's post-war context, had already revealed its own monstrous potential. Grotesque ambivalence is evident in the juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory elements. The image of supposedly "civilised" British schoolboys hunting with primitive weapons like spears and sticks is highlighted as a grotesque image due to the combination of inappropriate elements. Hunting, initially a game, becomes an outlet for animalistic instincts and contributes to the boys' becoming savage. This shift supports the grotesque image through its ambivalent qualities – the contrast between their background and their actions.

The dehumanization of the boys is linked to animalistic behaviours and Kayser's concept of the "id" as an alien, impersonal force controlling people like puppets (1981, p. 184). The slaughter of the pig is a key scene analysed for its grotesque qualities. It has carnivalesque characteristics as the boys display primitive nature, followed by a ritualistic dance. The graphic details of the brutal killing of the mother sow, described like a trench war struggle, are juxtaposed with the vibrant dancing of butterflies. This juxtaposition of violence/death and life/innocence creates grotesque ambivalence and amplifies the shock effect and pessimistic atmosphere. The excessiveness of blood, pain, and scream can be compared to the horrors of WWI and WWII. Crawford's term "piggification" (2002, p. 47) describes the boys' transformation from human beings to brutal beings.

It is emphasized how grotesque techniques, like exaggeration and ambivalence, help elevate the reader into a surreal world of fantasy and fiction. By making the readers defamiliarized or "bestranged," they become alienated from their own degraded state and are prompted to condemn characters and events that are, in fact, a mirror of themselves. Golding uses sudden defamiliarization strategies to awaken the reader, such as the final question posed by the naval officer. The real aim is to make the reader aware of the world's disgraced state, hypnotize them with fiction, and then shock them into awareness to increase the impact. The novel's ending, where the boys are rescued but the larger picture of human nature and the world remains

depressing, offers no relief, reinforcing the pessimistic message. The reader becomes aware that the fiction they have been reading reflects reality. The novel thus questions societal clichés like the innocence of children and the nobility of British people, presenting a satirical display of individual barbarousness. It shows the "death of the hero" (Cixous, 1974, p. 386) or "decline of character" (Philips, 2004, p. 636), as the boys fail to be easily admirable protagonists. Unchecked power is depicted as leading to moral and physical destruction, akin to Bakhtin's grotesque realism where people degrade themselves.

*Lord of the Flies* constructs a grotesque mirror through which the innocence of childhood is exposed as a fragile cultural illusion. Golding's hybrid and carnivalesque narrative dismantles the romanticized figure of the British schoolboy, reassembling it into a haunting image of post-war disillusionment. By employing grotesque techniques such as ambivalence, exaggeration, and defamiliarization, the novel confronts readers with a distorted but truthful reflection of human nature, where civilization and savagery are disturbingly intertwined.

## Carnival and Chaos: Subversive Aesthetics in *The Wasp Factory*

The part shifts the focus to Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factory* (1984), analysing its use of the grotesque, particularly the carnivalesque, in relation to its social and political context. The chapter argues that the novel, abundant with grotesque qualities, parallels the ongoing stress in society and the pessimistic atmosphere of the time it was written. It is examined for its physical grotesque qualities, the hybrid characteristics of the protagonist Frank, carnivalesque excess, exaggeration, excrement (linked to Kristeva's "abject"), and grotesque monstrosity. The novel tells the story of Frank Cauldhame, a 16-year-old living on an isolated island off Scotland with his secretive father, Angus. Frank, who has committed three murders of relatives between the ages of 6 and 9, justifies his actions in bizarre ways. He engages in compulsive rituals and builds machines like the Wasp Factory. A central mystery is Frank's apparent castration by the family dog, Old Saul. The novel delays the revelation of key secrets until the end, where it is revealed that Frank was not castrated but was born Frances, and his father, Angus, had been experimenting on him by giving him male hormones. This revelation is a major shock to both Frank and the reader. The novel's physical grotesque qualities are evident, particularly with the combination of inappropriate limbs from different beings. Frank collects dead animal parts, attaching their heads to poles. This act, narrated in a calm, trivializing tone, is seen as making the "demonic trivial" (1963, p. 17), in Jennings' terms. The storage vaults or "*grottoes*" of Frank and his father are also significant physical grotesque elements. Angus's locked study and Frank's loft where he keeps his machines, and the Wasp Factory serve as these hidden, secret places. Banks' narrative technique, termed "semantic economy" (Duggan, 2013, p. 153) or "deliberate postponement" (p. 156), involves delaying the revelation of truths and secrets. This technique is directly linked to increasing the grotesque tension and shock effect. Barthes' idea that truth is what is at the end of expectation (2002, pp. 22-23) aligns with this technique, keeping the reader continuously engaged and impatient for resolution. Examples of secrets delayed include details about Eric's past, Angus's past, the island's location, and the Wasp Factory's mechanism.

Graphic descriptions contribute significantly to the novel's grotesque horror and demonism. The scene in which Eric confronts maggots consuming a child's brain is a particularly visceral example, recalling the graphic intensity of war poets' trench imagery. Such moments sharply contrast with classical conceptions of beauty grounded in harmony, proportion, and aesthetic completion. As Seval argues, the grotesque rejects these ideals through distortion and incompleteness, remaining unsettling precisely because it "turns the familiar into the unfamiliar" (2008, p. 5). Frank's own acts of murder and torture are rendered with disturbing realism yet are frequently trivialised by his detached narration, a strategy that heightens readerly discomfort. His sadistic games and improvised tools further reinforce his monstrous qualities, situating the grotesque not as aesthetic failure but as a deliberate challenge to classical norms of beauty. Frank's hybrid identity is a central grotesque element. Born female (Frances) but raised as male (Frank), believing he was castrated, he lives with a "dual nature that exists simultaneously" (Edwards & Graulund, 2013, p. 61). This identity, along with the strange family

structure, deconstructs stereotypes related to sex/gender, innocent/evil, female/male, and family bonds. The family's history of weird deaths also adds to the uncanny and strange atmosphere.

The concept of carnivalesque excrement is explored, noting Banks's explicit descriptions of defecation, urination, and vomiting. These acts are seen as a subversive revolt against conventional notions of purity and cleanliness, linking to Kristeva's concept of the "abject" (1982, p. 1) – that which is violently cast out from the symbolic order. The characters' abjection from mainstream society (p. 12-15), living isolated on the island, is also seen as a macro abjection aligning with Kristeva's depictions of the abject. Despite Frank's monstrous actions, the study notes the difficulty in simply labelling him a monster, partly because Banks's fiction often deals with the blurring lines between being a player and being played upon. However, the novel presents a world "without moral judgement" (Nicholson, 1998, p. 269), where ignoble acts are realistically depicted without censorship, characteristic of some contemporary writers.

Iain Banks's deployment of grotesque strategies – most notably his spare, tightly-wound diction (semantic economy), vividly graphic passages, and the disruption of temporal continuity through flashbacks and flashforwards – operates not merely as sensational spectacle but as a means of metatextual commentary. By concentrating his language on precisely rendered, often horrifying details, Banks forces readers into a state of cognitive dissonance: the brevity of the prose allows no respite or ornamental cushioning, so that each image strikes with heightened intensity. In this way, the grotesque becomes a narrative hammer, shattering any complacent reading posture and instead prompting the reader to recognize the text's contractedness.

Moreover, Banks's non-linear structure – where memory intrudes upon the "present," and anticipation of future trauma seeps into retrospective accounts – continually fractures the story's temporal logic. These temporal jolts remind the reader that what they are consuming is artifice: every return to the "now" prompts a re-evaluation of what has come before and what remains to come. This persistent oscillation between past, present, and future undermines the illusion of a seamless fictional world; rather than allowing the reader to slip into vicarious enjoyment, it insists upon a vigilant, self-aware engagement. In effect, the grotesque functions as a metafictional device: it foregrounds the mechanics of storytelling (selection, omission, framing) and awakens the reader to the ethical and existential questions posed by a world so deeply degraded that only a radical, unsettling mode of representation can begin to do it justice.

He aimed to make the reader responsive to the horror and deformity around them, breaking their automated perception, thus fulfilling Shklovsky's purpose of art. The novel, seen as a bricolage of fragmented pieces of modern man, challenges conceptions about security, family, and gender identity. It reflects the fragmented, alienated, uncanny, sceptic, and insecure feelings of the contemporary individual. Frank's unchecked power, facilitated by his "official non-existence" (Banks, 2013, p. 11), leads to destruction, akin to the degradation in Bakhtinian grotesque realism.

### Childhood Revisited: The Grotesque Uncanny in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*

The part examines how the novel *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* utilizes grotesque elements in relation to Sigmund Freud's concept of "the uncanny" and Viktor Shklovsky's idea of "the purpose of art," which is to create "defamiliarization" or "bestrangement" and "deautomatized perception" (1965, p. 52). Additionally, the analysis connects the novel's structure and content to the critical term bricolage. The novel's structure can be seen as a form of bricolage, combining elements from various genres such as magical realism, gothic, horror, and realistic fiction. It fuses mythology, folklore, childhood experiences, and imagination, blurring the lines between fact and fiction. This hybridity, the combination of disparate components, is akin to the grotesque tradition and contributes to a sense of disquiet.

Manifestations of the physical grotesque are observed, including the characters' use of *grottoes* or hiding places, like the narrator's shed. The supernatural powers of the Hempstock women also place them in the category of the grotesque, as does the description of creatures like the

Manta wolf, which combines unnatural elements and symbolizes overstepped limits. The hybrid identity of characters, such as the Hempstock women being both sorcerers and compassionate grandmas or the narrator's shifting perception of his own identity and the world, further supports the grotesque hybridity. This blend of the familiar and the unfamiliar contributes to the uncanny effect, unsettling the reader.

A key technique employed in the novel is the use of time shifts and the distinction between the children's world and the adult world. The children's world is depicted as impulsive and resistant to formal rules, closer to Bakhtinian concepts of "misrule," while the adult world aligns more with structured, formal rules. The sudden shifts between realistic depiction and fantastical events, or between adult and childhood perspectives, serve to break the reader's automated perception and keep them engaged, in line with Shklovsky's purpose of art. This deliberate use of ambiguity and inconsistency encourages readers to question the narrative and their own understanding of reality.

## Conclusion

This study explores the representation of the grotesque tradition in three contemporary British novels, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory*, and Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, demonstrating its significance as a critical tool for addressing the perceived discontents of the modern world. The study recalibrates the critical understanding of Golding, Banks, and Gaiman by demonstrating that their use of the grotesque is not merely an aesthetic choice, but a structural form of "bricolage" that fundamentally alters the reader's perception of modernity. By rereading *Lord of the Flies* through the lens of Bakhtinian carnival, the study expands the scholarship on Golding beyond the traditional "survival narrative," revealing instead how he systematically dismantles the colonialist myths of *The Coral Island* and the facade of British exceptionalism. Similarly, the research elevates the critical discourse on Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory* by moving past its reputation for shock value; it posits the novel as a sophisticated, modern *Frankensteinian* satire that exposes the fragility of societal "superstructures" such as scientific authority and gender norms. Furthermore, the analysis of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* contributes a new dimension to Gaiman studies by identifying the "uncanny" not just as a genre trope, but as a mechanism to critique the nuclear family, portraying the domestic sphere as a locus of alienation rather than safety. Ultimately, this study establishes that these authors collectively deploy the grotesque to construct a "bricolage" of contemporary existence, fulfilling Shklovsky's purpose of art by stripping away familiarity to confront the reader with the pessimism and insecurity of the modern human condition.

The analysis confirms that the grotesque in these novels effectively serves Viktor Shklovsky's "purpose of art" – to prevent the automation of perception and force the reader into conscious engagement. By employing techniques like grotesque imagery, unexpected narrative shifts, and the presentation of ambiguous or unpopular characters, the authors impede the reader's automatic understanding and create a "shock mechanism." This shock, often combined with an "uncanny effect," forces the reader to re-evaluate familiar concepts and confront the uncomfortable realities depicted. This results in keeping the reader alert while reading the work instead of getting lost in the fictional enjoyable illusion created by the novels. Rather than letting the reader enjoy the automated fun of reading a novel, the novels force the reader outside the context, which causes continuous questioning of the modern self.

The novels collectively reflect the pessimism and uncertainty of the modern era. Concepts once held as secure, such as the innocence of children, the sanctity of family, or the infallibility of civilization, are challenged and undermined. The resulting "fragmented, alienated, uncanny, sceptic, and insecure feelings" (Ordu, 2024, p. 172) of the contemporary individual are vividly portrayed through the grotesque imagery and narrative techniques employed, where the grotesque, in this context, functions as a "realistic art form of modern times" (Ordu, 2024, p. 143), capable of capturing the "inherent irregularities, chaotic institutions, and behaviours" (Ordu, 2024, p. 154) of a world that often feels disjointed and unsettling. In conclusion, the

grotesque tradition provides a robust framework for understanding how *Lord of the Flies*, *The Wasp Factory*, and *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* critique contemporary society. By deconstructing norms, employing bricolage techniques, creating uncanny effects, and utilizing the shock mechanism aligned with Shklovsky's "purpose of art," these novels compel readers to confront uncomfortable truths about human nature and the state of the world. The findings suggest that the grotesque is not merely an aesthetic choice, but a conscious and powerful strategy used by authors to reflect and challenge the anxieties, moral ambiguities, and perceived degradation of the contemporary era. The study's examination of these novels through this multi-faceted theoretical lens provides valuable insights into the continued relevance and adaptability of the grotesque in British fiction. The ideas explored here, particularly concerning the link between the grotesque and bricolage in reflecting societal discontents, offer potential avenues for further research into contemporary literature and art forms.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Declaration of AI Use

Any AI-assisted tools, if used, were limited to language editing. No AI tools were used for data collection, analysis, or interpretation of findings. The author(s) assume sole responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and final content of the manuscript.

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