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The Grotesque Male Body in Contemporary Fiction

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## Introduction

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[Oscar] examined himself in the mirror. The fat! The miles of stretch marks! The tumescent horribleness of his proportions! He looked straight out of a Daniel Clowes comic book. Or like the fat blackish kid in Beto Hernandez's Palomar. (Diaz 29)

Oscar De Leon, later on known as Oscar Wao, is the adolescent Dominican-American protagonist of Junot Diaz's 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Unlike other men in his family and neighborhood, Oscar is unable to "get" girls. He is also not interested in them in the same purely-physical way as his fellow men do, but is very emotional and falls easily in love. Additionally, Oscar's unusual appearance and obsession with "nerdy" hobbies contribute to making him an outcast.

In the quoted passage above Oscar strips naked and takes a brave look at the body that he has grown to hate. He is disgusted by his fat and large proportions. He no longer sees himself as a human being but as a ridiculed comic-book figure. Oscar is not able to imitate the behavior or appearance of what he understands and is taught is "a man." The "manliness" of the people around him is supposedly an inherent trait – in the genes of every Dominican man: "this is a Dominican kid we're talking about, in a Dominican family: dude was supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands" (23-24). So besides the lack of the expected charisma, Oscar's body disobeys the rules of Dominican masculinity. Oscar is extremely fat, probably bordering on obesity, his hair is out of control, and his eyes convey a drowsy look that makes him look, as Junot has it, "retarded" (20). In the world of the novel, Oscar is a warning sign to Dominican men (and not only to them) of how ridiculous and awful they will look if they will let their bodies transgress the "appropriate" boundaries.

Oscar's sense of his body as aberrant will be familiar to readers of contemporary fiction about female characters, which often focus on the boundaries of the female body. It

is female characters who usually worry about having the "wrong" kind of body and fear that they will be mocked, ostracized, or linked with the "wrong" set of values. Scholars have explored these kinds of images using Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of the "classical" and "grotesque" body. The classical body, traditionally attributed to the "ideal" female, is relatively small in proportions, smooth, ageless, hairless, closed off. The grotesque body deviates from the strict rules that define the classical body: it is usually large in proportions, shows age, and is linked to all those bodily functions that are considered to be impolite. In Western tradition, the view of the body as either classical or grotesque carried a moral meaning as well: the grotesque woman was often also characterized as the "bad" woman, and the classical woman as the "good." In women's writing of the last decades and in the criticism devoted to it, these concepts have been re-examined and made more complicated. But do such images of the body carry the same kind of meanings when they appear in writing about men? This question, as well as the usefulness of Bakhtin's categories for understanding the portrayal of male bodies in contemporary fiction, will be the subject of my thesis.

## **Aims and General Description**

In my thesis I intend to apply the theory of the grotesque and classical body, which scholars have previously used mainly for reading portrayals of women, as a means of understanding masculinity in contemporary fiction. I will discuss Bakhtin's theory and its feminist uses and then apply the model of the two bodies, classical and grotesque, in my reading of two contemporary novels: Junot Diaz's *The Brief and Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) and Rose Tremain's *Restoration* (1989). My aim will be to show its function in the construction of masculinity.

## **Methodology**

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My thesis will involve close reading of *The Brief and Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Restoration* while drawing on the Bakhtinian concepts of the classical and grotesque body – a theory that has been widely used for analyzing the portrayal of women, but to the best of my knowledge has not been applied to images of masculinity in fiction. The theoretical discussion of the "female grotesque" has shown that descriptions of the body carry a deep meaning for the construction of femininity. My reading of these novels will look for similar resonances for the construction of masculinity. My thesis will therefore combine close reading with analysis using concepts derived from feminist scholarship and masculinity studies.

## **Scholarly and Critical Background**

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The terms "grotesque" and "classical" body are taken from Mikhail Bakhtin's book *Rabelais and His World*. The "grotesque" body, according to Bakhtin, is "never finished... it outgrows its own self transgressing its own body... [it] ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon" (317-318). The description of the grotesque body focuses on the open elements of the human body: the mouth, the nose, the sexual organs, etc; "all of these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome" (317). The body's products – saliva, vomit, mucus, sweat, blood and (a lot) more – all transgress the borders between the body and the world (or another body). This body is also defined by its opposite – the closed, smoothed over, static body, termed the "classical" body.

Feminist critics have noted that Bakhtin's grotesque body has a long history of being associated specifically with women. Western culture has tended to emphasize the changing

and fluid nature of women's bodies (all the while ignoring that men's bodies go through changes of their own). Kathleen Rowe argues that the "grotesque body is above all the female body, the *maternal* body, which through menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, participates uniquely in the carnivalesque drama of 'becoming,' of inside-out and outside-in, death-in-life and life-in-death" (33–34, emphasis original). A similar emphasis on the unstable boundaries of the female body can be found in Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, which presents the maternal body as an object of fascination and horror. Mary Russo sees the Bakhtinian grotesque as reflecting fear and disgust of the maternal, aging and reproducing body. The image of the pregnant hag, which Bakhtin presents as "typical grotesque," is "loaded with all of the connotations of fear and loathing associated with the biological processes of aging" (Russo 1986: 219).

The classical body has often been used in literature, ads, and film to represent the ideal woman (see Robbins and Shapira). As these and other critics have argued, not only is the Bakhtinian grotesque body frequently feminized, so is its opposite – the classical body – as the equivalent to what Western culture perceives as the ideal woman. She is of small proportions, her skin is smooth and hairless, she is "static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek" (Russo 1995: 3). This double, schematic view of the female body is not neutral and has traditionally been loaded with values. The "good" woman has usually been associated with the classical body, while the "bad" woman has been portrayed as grotesque. One is portrayed as chaste, kind and lovely, and the other as promiscuous, dangerous and disgusting. In literature, as in culture, the grotesque woman belongs to the long and ongoing tradition of misogyny: the grotesque body functions as means of warning against disorderly behavior. While feminist theorists have found that historical descriptions of the grotesque body as female were demeaning and constricting, feminist writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – e.g., Margaret Atwood, Anne Sexton, Erica Jong, Toni Morrison and Eve Ensler – employed this

tool as means of empowerment and liberation. By writing about the woman's body, these authors allowed readers/critics to learn about other issues: the triumph of giving birth, maternal love, acceptance of one's body, pleasure in sex and more.

The perspective I wish to suggest in this thesis is somewhat contradictory to the feminist interpretation of Bakhtin's theory, which has insisted that the traditional grotesque is inherently feminized. But such bodies, as the example from Diaz shows, can also appear in stories about men. Oddly, while there have been various studies looking at women's bodies through the prism of the classical/grotesque dichotomy, as far as I can tell the same has not been done for writing about men's bodies. Looking at the male body as being either classical or grotesque is not a common critical view, and if it exists, it apparently does not use the terms "grotesque" and "classical."

I believe that the male body today and in contemporary literature requires a re-examination. I suggest using the same dichotomous concepts of the grotesque versus the classical for considering how men's bodies are portrayed in contemporary fiction. One of the reasons for my choice is that men, similarly to women, are beginning to show signs of alienation or even worse, depression, as a response to having bodies that are not keeping up with societal expectations. It is also possible that feminism not only empowered women and made them more aware of their bodies and the way they were viewed, but also opened the eyes of men to the gender constructs that instruct their every move and gesture. Another factor may be the pressure caused by the West's youth- and beauty-obsessed modern culture, which dominates every possible media.

It is fascinating to consider what kind of insights we might reach if we will utilize the same concepts for thinking about male bodies. What does it mean for a male body to be "classical" or "grotesque"? If pregnancy and menstruation are not part of it, then what is? Are the anxieties and fantasies attached to them the same? Is there the same cautionary

element that categorizes the grotesque man as dangerous and rejected? To go back to Bakhtin, why shouldn't the male body be considered in terms of its "material bodily level, to the level of food, drink, sexual life, and the bodily phenomena linked with them" (309)? Do we not share most bodily functions and needs? The male body is certainly changeable and has secretions of its own. Does this fluidity of boundaries affect the way that such bodies are portrayed in fiction?

Portrayals of the male body in contemporary popular culture suggest that the ideal male body is becoming more similar to the ideal female one. Smooth and hairless male bodies are becoming more and more popular in the media. Even the stiff, muscular, large "body-builder" is being replaced by the more gentle looking swimmer/runner body. Scholarship on this topic has come primarily from studies of film and visual media (see Morgan, Lehman and Bordo), which suggest that the aesthetics of the male body in Western culture indeed changed towards the end of the twentieth century. Though the films of the 1950s celebrated the shirtless, sometimes violent man-child, the male body was not given as much focus as the naked female body. Besides, that male body was strong and aggressive, unlike the "sexually inviting" female body, only half conscious of its own sex appeal. In the mid-1990s, however, came a change, exemplified by Calvin Klein ads that portray men – particularly their bodies – in traditionally feminine postures that suggest erotic allure.

Few critics have written about this issue, and those who do stress the silence that has surrounded the male body. Susan Bordo, one of the major writers in this field, ironically notes that there was always fascination in research with women's bodies, "but they have been remarkably good at forgetting that men have a sex" (19). According to Bordo, men do share many of the anxieties that women famously experience over their bodies. Though she doesn't use the terms "grotesque" and "classical," she does make important distinctions that separate the culturally considered "good" man from the "bad." Her main argument about the



male body is separated to "soft" and "hard", thus using the penis as a symbol for the entire body. The hard body is active, initiating and strong; the soft body, claims Bordo, is flaccid, useless, disappointing. With these expectations to perform – and not just sexually– comes the humiliation in failure. Experiencing shame over a body that constantly fails to live up to society's expectations because of, well, nature, "[is an experience] a woman can relate to," she says; "I have been amazed at how much unexpected kinship I've felt with men while writing this book, and how many old myths I have been led to revisit and revise" (35).

I, like Bordo, am also driven by the recognition that issues that are usually attributed to women in fiction, such as the concern with weight, sickness and sexual function, are now also tied to men. Men in novels now regard their bodies the way women do. The issue of weight exists in both novels I propose to study. Oscar's feeling of detachment from his body, and disgust at his own fat, and Merivel's constant descriptions of his belly are reminiscent of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary* (1996):

I feel ashamed and repulsive. I can actually feel the fat splurging out from my body. Never mind. Sometimes you have to sink to a nadir of toxic fat envelopment in order to emerge, phoenix-like, from the chemical wasteland as a purged and beautiful Michelle Pfeiffer figure. Tomorrow new Spartan health and beauty regime will begin (16).

Sickness and the deterioration of the body is also a topic that has been explored in literature about women. In her 1993 play *Wit* (also known by the movie production carrying the same title) Margaret Edson deals with the theme of illness: her heroine, Vivian Bearing, is diagnosed with ovarian cancer and describes her bodily decline and the emotions and thoughts that accompany the process. Rose Tremain explores the issue of failing health through the reaction of her hero, the Restoration physician Merivel, to the illness of his friend Pearce and to the patients he cares for at a mental hospital in Norfolk. And finally,

anxieties regarding sexual function are experienced both by Oscar and Merivel. We have already encountered this issue in the aforementioned famous *Vagina Monologues*.

Reading contemporary fiction strengthens my belief that men are now being forced to view their bodies through a classical/grotesque, good/bad lens. In my thesis I want to explore what it look like for a man to contemplate these emotions by a close reading of two contemporary novels vis-à-vis Bakhtin's theory and its feminist applications.

## **Chapter Outline**

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My thesis will be comprised of a theoretical introduction, two chapters and a conclusion. Following the introduction, each chapter will discuss the different ways in which the grotesque male body concept can be seen in each novel.

**Introduction.** This chapter will introduce the reader to the critical and theoretical background, namely, Bakhtin's concepts of the classical/grotesque body and their application by later critics to the female body. By presenting examples of the female grotesque in literature, the introduction will discuss how this imagery has developed and the changing understanding of it in the relevant critical material. I will then draw on contemporary studies of masculinity and the male body using examples from different media, showing how these might be useful for understanding the male grotesque in fiction.

**Chapter One.** *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* tells the story of Oscar, a growing boy who finds that he is an outcast because of the way he looks and acts. Unfortunately, Oscar's inability to be accepted by his Dominican-American society and his own disgust towards his body lead him to depression and even to a suicide attempt. This chapter will discuss the ways in which Junot Diaz portrays the male body and compare these to the portrayal of female bodies as "grotesque." The chapter will further pose the

novel's "classical" male alongside the grotesque in order to understand the source of Oscar's anxieties.

In a novel that is all about "fitting in," there is more than one way in which Oscar is feeling rejected. As a boy from a Dominican family who grows up in the States, Oscar belongs neither here nor there. Oscar's struggle with the "borders" of his body and with his own masculinity is intermixed with his confusion at his national identity and sense of belonging. In this chapter I will also explore the relationship between what I believe are the two major themes in the novel: the male grotesque and nationality.

**Chapter Two.** Chapter Two will discuss *Restoration*, a 1989 historical novel by Rose Tremain. This novel takes place in 17<sup>th</sup> century England and tells the story of Robert Merivel, a court physician who rises from rags to riches only to lose it all again. Even though Tremain's story is loyal to 17<sup>th</sup> century habits, clothing, speech and more, it is nonetheless conjured by a modern mind. Merivel's body plays a major role in the story. It is sometimes the object of laughter and joy, and at others of mockery, failure and disgust. But Merivel's body is not the only body in a novel that takes particular interest in anatomical and psychological aspects of the human body. As a young student of medicine, Merivel considers the dissection of a starling a pivotal moment in his life and marvels at his sheer luck for having had the rare opportunity to hold a man's beating heart in his hand. It is therefore interesting to see how a modern mind views a 17<sup>th</sup> century male body.

In order to apply Bakhtin's theory of the "classical" and "grotesque" body, I will try to define what those bodies mean in Tremain's novel. I will also examine how the portrayal of the body gains further meaning from the association with location. The first half of the novel takes place mostly in Whitehall – the king's residence. It is a place all aspire to reach. The second half of the novel takes place in Whittlesea, a Bedlam – a place where even relatives rarely come to visit the sick. As one presents health, wealth, strength and authority,

the other reveals embarrassing bodily products, poverty and insanity. I wish to explore the relationship between Merival and the body of King Charles II vis-à-vis the comparison of Whittlesea and Whitehall. This chapter will discuss the ways in which the detailed portrayal of the human body and its various functions correspond with Tremain's exploration of the Restoration as a specific moment in English history.

**Conclusion.** The conclusion will review the novels' different point of views on masculinity and the anxieties that come with it. The purpose of this chapter is to draw conclusions from the examples examined in the novels in order to better understand the complicated field of the male-grotesque.

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