

UNHAPPILY EVER AFTER:
EDWARD GOREY AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

By

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by

Kevin K. Shortsleeve

For Mary

my sister,
trusted friend and good companion in conversation,
who first introduced me to Edward Gorey

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My thesis examines the relationship between Edward Gorey's canon and the field of children's literature. Both critical and public perceptions of Gorey's work indicate that he has been overlooked as an author appropriate for child readers. I explain how this perception arose and where this perception is mistaken. My purpose in this essay is to confirm that Edward Gorey was a children's author and, further, that his contributions to the field of nonsense literature are both unique and valuable precisely because his work and career raise doubts about the accuracy of current understandings of children's literature. I will begin by examining why Gorey's work has been so difficult to categorize, suggesting that an unusual publishing decision and Gorey's steadfast ambivalence about his own career combined to prevent his acceptance as a children's author. An examination of Gorey's thematic concerns and personal background confirms that childhood was one of his principal themes, and that Gorey worked solidly in the tradition of nonsense literature, his verse inspired by the nonsense rhymes of Edward

Lear, Lewis Carroll and Heinrich Hoffman. The violence in Gorey's work is, furthermore, both largely innocuous and necessary to this genre. Ultimately, I will suggest that because his verses combine the traditional mores of the fathers of nonsense with a liberating blend of modern and postmodern tendencies, Gorey's works represent a valuable advance in nonsense literature. The author's dark verses are, in fact, uniquely situated to offer a rewarding set of challenges to the child reader.

Following the main text I provide a more detailed examination of violence in children's literature in the form of a three-part appendix. By examining the problem of adult projection, comparing alternate media and performing a content analysis, I hope to further dispel the notion that Gorey's texts are unsafe for children.

PROLOGUE

On April 15, 2000, Edward Gorey, author of a notorious canon of verse and prose, departed this life. One hesitates to guess which of the two traditionally imagined afterlives he may now inhabit--indeed, which of the two he would have preferred. If Gorey could have eulogized his own passing, he might have quoted from his *Utter Zoo*.

About the Zote what can be said?
There was just one, and now its dead.

Yet Gorey will never be gone entirely. The residue of his life lingers in thousands of libraries, hip boutiques and curiosity cluttered bookshelves around the world. And for friends and fans, there is yet more to be discovered. As Gorey wrote in *The Chinese Obelisks*:

Y was the Yew beneath which he was laid.
[but]
Z was the zither he left to his maid.

In the wake of his passing, Andreus Brown, Gorey's longtime friend, publisher, archivist of his works and now executor of his estate, has been sorting through the "zithers" Gorey left us. Brown, who is helping to organize a museum dedicated to the late author, spent the greater part of 2000 cataloging the contents of Gorey's poison ivy encrusted Victorian on Cape Cod. Amid boxes and shelves stuffed with garage sale treasures and odd bits of funnily shaped iron objects were found more than 25,000 books on art, and ten lonely cats. Gorey, who illustrated a guide on how to die, was meticulous with regards to where and how certain of his possessions should be bequeathed; A pair of white high-top tennis

shoes to a lunch mate; a fund to support a bat research facility in Texas. Other items, however, Gorey left no instructions for. These possess an enigmatic quality and one is not certain what should be done with them. For example--as in life--Gorey provided no instructions as to how to classify, categorize or publicize his works--published or unpublished. The unpublished come in the form of neatly stacked piles and carefully stuffed drawers of verses and sketches. Among these materials is a collection of Gorey's illustrations for the rhymed verses of Hilaire Belloc's *Cautionary Tales*. For Gorey, the medley of grim subjects was a sort of life work that had occupied his 'free time' for nearly twenty years. For Brown, standing amid the remains of a unique and somewhat perplexing career, the task is to prepare the illustrations for release. But release to whom? What sort of publication should this be? How should it be promoted? Belloc, most people agree, wrote for children. But Gorey?¹

¹ According to Brown, Gorey's *Cautionary Tales* of Hilaire Belloc will be published in December 2002.

GOREY, THE ENIGMA: THE PROBLEM DESCRIBED AND THESIS STATEMENT

A lot of my books I've intended for children primarily.
Edward Gorey (Wynne-Jones 543)

Ted Gorey is perfect for children, and that's the saddest thing of all; that they [his books] weren't allowed to be published that way.
Maurice Sendak (Interview)

Following his death and during his own lifetime there appears to have been a great deal of disagreement as to whether or not the works of Edward Gorey should be categorized as children's books. Obituaries on and critiques of the curious author run the gamut on the issue. Kate Taylor of the *Toronto Globe and Mail* affirmed that "Gorey is not a children's author" (R-5). Mel Gussow commented in *The New York Times*, that Gorey was "sometimes mistakenly categorized as an author of children's books" ("Edward Gorey" B-8). For others, Gorey's obituary was the perfect opportunity to warn any who might make that very mistake; for example, in London, Brian Sibley of *The Independent* reported that "It might be argued that [Gorey's verses] were, by their subject matter, quite unsafe for children" (R-6). With less conviction, Myrna Oliver, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, offered that his texts were merely "hard to categorize as children's books" (B-6), suggesting that indeed, they *might* be children's books after all. *The Daily Telegraph* reported that "most of his material was aimed at reasonably small children" ("Edward Gorey: Recluse" 31), and Celia Anderson and Marilyn Apseloff, in *Nonsense Literature for Children, Aesop to Seuss*, confirmed that many children do

appreciate Gorey's verses (139) and suggested that the dark themes depicted in them are indicative of its affiliation with a sub-genre of nonsense literature (35). Completing the spectrum, Amy Hanson exhibited no apprehension whatsoever when, in a 1998 article in *Biblio*, she enthused that [Gorey] "has written many gently humorous books that are suitable for young readers" (20).

My purpose in this essay is to confirm that Edward Gorey was a children's author, and further, that his contributions to the field of nonsense are both unique and valuable precisely because his work and career raise doubts about the accuracy of current understandings of children's literature. I will begin by examining why Gorey's work has been so difficult to categorize, suggesting that an unusual publishing decision, and Gorey's steadfast ambivalence about his own career, combined to prevent his acceptance as a children's author. An examination of Gorey's thematic concerns and personal background confirms that childhood was one of his principal themes, and that Gorey worked solidly in the tradition of nonsense literature, his verse inspired by the nonsense rhymes of Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll and Heinrich Hoffman. The violence in Gorey's work is, furthermore, both largely innocuous and necessary to this genre. Ultimately, I will suggest that because his verses combine the traditional mores of the fathers of nonsense with a liberating blend of modern and postmodern tendencies, Gorey's works represent a valuable advance in nonsense literature. The author's dark verses are, in fact, uniquely situated to offer a rewarding set of challenges to the child reader.

Following the main text I provide a more detailed examination of violence in children's literature in the form of a three-part appendix. By examining the problem of

adult projection, comparing alternate media and performing a content analysis, I hope to further dispel the notion that Gorey's texts are unsafe for children.

DISMANTLING THE LEGEND

Because of Gorey's complex public persona, we must dismantle the legend before we can examine the mechanics of his verse. Gorey is perceived, by many, as one devoid of any interest in children or children's literature. After his rise to popularity among an adult audience, Gorey maintained a somewhat false impression that he had no significant investment in the concept of the 'child' or 'childhood.' In interviews he often skirted questions about his work's appeal to children and more than once glibly reported that he did not know any children. It is significant, however, that, throughout his career, Gorey was involved in the field of children's literature, and particularly, children's poetry. In 1959, shortly after he began publishing his rhyming picture books, Gorey became a founding editor at The Looking Glass Library, a short-lived publishing firm dedicated to releasing children's classics in hardback, including Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense* and *The Looking Glass Book of Verse*. In the 1960s and 70s, Gorey worked tirelessly as an illustrator of children's books. He provided art for numerous volumes and was especially effective when accompanying the verses of children's poets like Lear and John Ciardi. For many years, in fact, Gorey's main source of income was as an illustrator of children's books. His collaborations with Peter Neumeier such as *Why We Have Day and Night* and with Florence Perry Heide in her *Treehorn* series are particularly well remembered. Gorey once taught Children's Literature at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. His course prospectus from Fall, 1965 reads:

The course will emphasize the creative and imaginative aspects of illustrating--and writing--children's books and give practical experience in techniques, media, design, and typography. Included will be an informal history of children's books [. . .] and a survey of the field now, ranging from the picture book for the youngest child to the novel for the young adult [. . .] The course will deal, also, with the nature of illustration [. . .] its relationship to text, and the two conceived as one entity.
(Course Prospectus 1)

Later in life, in addition to his own work and illustration for others, he created dolls for children and produced puppet shows annually on Cape Cod.

THE PUBLISHING SITUATION

Despite this lifelong involvement in children's entertainment, scholars, critics and everyday readers have been unsure how to classify the picture books Gorey authored himself. Faced with a canon that appears to link childhood and the macabre, many, at first glance, are challenged, and may refuse to validate the connection. Yet, much of the confusion regarding Gorey's work is due more to the manner in which his stories have been anthologized. His single-title picture books have largely been unavailable to a mass-market audience. Often, first editions of Gorey's individual titles are produced in small press runs. These volumes are swooped up rapidly by Gorey aficionados and it is not uncommon for these single-title books to become collectable within a year of release. Most people who have read him, then, have done so within the confines of three coffee-table size anthologies, *Amphigorey* (1972), *Amphigorey Too* (1975) and *Amphigorey Also* (1983). As Gorey himself admitted in a preface to *Amphigorey*, "[The original releases] are now difficult and often expensive to come by: hence this compilation." The three anthologies, which comprise fifty-two picture books, were assembled in such a way that the titles suitable for children were placed alongside those that many would suggest are not suitable. In *Amphigorey*, for example, delightful rhyming works such as *The Doubtful Guest* and *The Wuggly Ump*, which could appropriately be categorized as children's books, sit in uncomfortably close proximity to titles many would suggest are unsuitable for a child, such as the risqué *Curious Sofa*, and the brutal *Hapless Child*. The problem is intensified by the look of the volumes. Each story has the feel of a children's

picture book, and jaunty rhyming verse implies that innocent reading awaits. So the “hapless child” who is left alone reading with delight in *The Wuggly Ump*, “Sing tirraloo, sing tirralay, The Wuggly Ump lives far away” is likely, having finished that tale, to flip through the pages and read in *The Listing Attic*:

A head strong young woman in Ealing
Threw her two weeks old child at the ceiling;
When quizzed why she did,
She replied, “To be rid
Of a strange overpowering feeling.”

While *The Wuggly Ump* does eat the children in the end, the story is clearly in good fun, and it presents a theme that many children relate to (monsters) and a vocabulary that can be easily read. That same child reader may have more difficulty discerning the humor or meaning of the “Head Strong Young Woman” limerick. In the next anthology, *Amphigorey Too*, one of Gorey’s greatest achievements in children’s literature, *The Untitled Book*--an assemblage of Lear-esque nonsense words (“Flappity flippity, flip, Thumbleby stumbleby, Rambleby rumbleby”) and fanciful creatures is juxtaposed against *The Deranged Cousins* which includes such gems as “Mary struck Rose with a brown china doorknob she had already found and killed her... This incident caused her to become a religious maniac.” And in *Amphigorey Also*, Gorey’s funny and harmless rhyming cautionary tale, *The Stupid Joke*, is joined by *The Loathsome Couple*, a tale in prose that appears, at first glance, to be a “humorous” look at child serial killers.¹

When Gorey’s anthologies were being readied for release, the publishers did not include children in their concept of the target audience. Fearing public disapproval of

¹ While Gorey admitted that *The Loathsome Couple* was an upsetting work, he defended it on the grounds that it was based on a true story, the case of the Moors murders. And as a reader pointed out to me, *The Loathsome Couple* can be viewed as one of Gorey’s most moral stories as it is one of his few tales in which the guilty are punished.

even the most innocuous of his works, publishers have apparently been wary of labeling Gorey's books as appropriate for young readers for quite some time. According to Andreas Brown, in Gorey's entire career, apparently only one book, *The Wuggly Ump*, was promoted specifically as a children's title. Focusing on an adult audience, then, the publishers made the anthologies as inclusive as possible.

Had Gorey been concerned with this problem, or had he endeavored to produce a separate volume containing only his works that might be deemed appropriate for children, such confusion would surely have never arisen or would have been dispelled. But Gorey actively resisted categorization, preferring to let the public reach its own conclusions about what sort of writer he was. Nor was he one to promote himself. He resisted many attempts by publicists to increase his fame. It was only reluctantly that he allowed his works to be anthologized – a move that secured his reputation among a wide audience. He refused to accept a Tony Award, thinking it unimportant, and he let deals with Disney and Jim Henson fall by the wayside simply because he felt he lacked the time to attend to them. Reportedly living a somewhat reclusive life on Cape Cod, he resisted nearly all attempts to promote his work. As Stephen Schiff observed in *The New Yorker* in 1992:

In New York, a small squadron of Gorey devotees has been trying for several frustrating years to make his name a household word; he seems to tolerate their efforts, but can't bring himself to participate much. "Edward has kept himself protected from success" says friend Clifford Ross, an artist and producer who has known him for over twenty years. "I was telling him on the phone about some projects we were working on for him, but he wasn't responding... Sometimes with him nothing happens, because nothing is exactly what he wants to happen." (86)

As Gorey wrote:

The Dawbis is remote and shy;

It shuns the gaze of passers-by. (The Utter Zoo)

This tendency to avoid promotion is another reason Edward Gorey was never “discovered” as a children’s author. The business of children’s publishing is like any other, in that the need for promotion is indeed very real. Book tours, radio appearances and attendance at celebrity weddings do count for something.

Gorey’s ambivalence concerning his status as a children’s author appears to have occurred gradually. According to Gorey himself, “*The Doubtful Guest* [1957] was for children, by my estimation” (Filstrup 22). The marketing department at Doubleday, however, were unsure of Gorey’s conviction, and provided flap copy that belied their insecurity: “What sort of book is this? You may well ask... What *The Doubtful Guest* is, you’ll just have to decide for yourself.” Confusion with publishers as to whether or not Gorey’s works were appropriate for children continued for several years, culminating in 1961, in the now notorious, mistaken, release by the Dodd Mead Company of *The Curious Sofa* as a children’s book. Gorey did not intend the ribald and highly suggestive tale for children, and yet it was, in error, delivered to children’s book departments causing confusion and alarm to all concerned (Brown). That event did nothing to reassure mainstream publishers and by the mid-sixties editors were generally too skittish to commit any of Gorey’s titles to a young audience. In a 1978 interview in *The Lion and the Unicorn* Gorey comments:

I have thought that more of my work might have been for children than anybody would ever publish on a juvenile list... I used to try to persuade a publisher by saying, “Why don’t you bring this out as a children’s book? I have an adult audience which will buy the book anyway. You might as well pick up some children along the line.” But they would not risk it, they’d get all twittery. So I gave up. (qtd. in Filstrup 22).

By 1970, busy at work on Peter Neumeyer's *Donald* books, Gorey had almost nothing to say about children's books or children's publishing. Neumeyer notes:

I truly can't recall Ted ever once having used the word "child" (or any circumlocution thereof), let alone the words "children's book," and certainly never "children's literature"... he didn't talk or think about "creating books for children," as I recall. (Neumeyer – Interview)

Yet, later in my correspondence with Neumeyer, he located a letter Gorey had written to him concerning the *Donald* books. Gorey wrote "One point I would make... is that I do not see this story as being for children at all; which fact does affect my thinking about the drawings" (qtd. in Neumeyer, Interview). If then, at this time, Gorey wasn't willing to discuss "children's literature" openly, he at least was maintaining a conviction about what sorts of stories and images appeal to children. Gorey's interest in children's literature appears, in fact, to have been a career-long interest of his and we may speculate, that his seeming ambivalence concerning his status as a children's book author was something of a facade. Inside, Gorey believed the publishers were wrong about his work. He was, however, unwilling to argue the point year after year.

CHILDHOOD AND EDWARD GOREY

Gorey was in touch with childhood on several levels and his writings reflect the depth of those concerns. Alison Lurie points out that Gorey's most well known character, the inexplicable Doubtful Guest, may indeed represent a child. Upon learning of Lurie's pregnancy, (Gorey and Lurie were longtime friends since their Harvard days) Gorey dedicated to her what would become one his most popular works. Lurie notes:

The title character in the [Doubtful Guest] is smaller than anyone in the family. It has a peculiar appearance at first and does not understand language. As time passes it becomes greedy and destructive: It tears pages out of books, has temper tantrums, and walks in its sleep. Yet nobody even tries to get rid of the creature; their attitude toward it remains one of resigned acceptance. Who is this Doubtful Guest? The last page of the story makes everything clear:

It came seventeen years ago –
And to this day
It has shown no intention of
Going away.

Of course, after seventeen years, most children leave home. (20)

Of the fifty-two picture books featured in the anthologies, thirty-nine depict or include children in some way. Collectively and individually (and obscurely, as above) it is the children in Edward Gorey's verses who are often the most memorable characters.

Further, it was perhaps in his works that articulate the concerns of childhood that Gorey was at his most insightful. He clearly had a keen understanding of what frightens children even if he didn't think child readers would 'really' be frightened by his images-- huge, dimly lit empty halls with doors leading on into other huge dimly lit empty halls--

staircases that descend into a black abyss--dragons and ghouls and, of course, those menacing adults. Gorey's penchant for depicting eerie waifs in eerier situations indicates an emotional investment in childhood that clearly informed his career.

Lurie observes that many of Gorey's characters "tend to seem baffled or oppressed by life" (20). This is especially so for the children in his books. In Gorey's *The Gilded Bat*, a child prodigy ballerina is taken from childhood and sadly thrust into a world of adult concerns. Knowing about similar experiences in Gorey's childhood (Gorey was himself a child prodigy) one may perhaps conclude that some of the author's keen understanding of children's suffering may have been inspired by his own experiences. Gorey variously maintained that he had either a sad or a happy childhood. What is certain is that he somehow taught himself to read at age three and, from then on, was disconnected from what most would consider a 'normal' childhood. He read *Dracula* and *Alice in Wonderland* at age five. By age eight, he had read the complete works of Victor Hugo. His parents' divorce when he was a child and a series of disruptive family moves, as well as his skipping entire grades, further removed the precocious Edward from our society's traditionally conceived notions of the carefree child. As Gorey remembered it:

We moved around a lot when I was a child; I never quite understood that. I mean, at one point I skipped two grades at grammar school, but I went to five different grammar schools, so I was always changing schools it seemed to me... I hated moving, and we were always doing it. Sometimes we just moved a block away into another apartment; it was all very weird. (qtd. in "Interview," Henwood, 166)

Perhaps it is no wonder that a grammar school-age child with a college level intellect--who must deal with a disruptive home environment, the loss of a parent and even suffer a lonely year in Miami at a boarding school (Brown)--should carry with him

some heavy emotional baggage into adulthood. And while Gorey's childhood may in some ways appear as a rushed ascendance into adulthood, his adulthood appeared in many ways to be a lingering visit to childhood. He was known to speak in a sing-song way, often ending a sentence by actually singing the last word. As Mel Gussow quoted Gorey, "I'm always trying to keep myself open to inspiration, tra-la" (Gussow, "A Little Blood" C-4). He dressed ostentatiously and liked to preserve an air of mystery about him. He maintained what some considered a "smothering" relationship with his mother well into his middle age. He never married, and never had any children of his own. He was often heard to say words like 'jeepers' and 'zippy.' He collected toys.

Those who knew Gorey suggested that it was a quality of his to be childishly unaware that anyone might find what he says objectionable. Indeed, Schiff identified that one of the reasons Gorey's more violent texts are palatable at all is because you get the impression that the author "hadn't quite grasped the situation" (87). This would seem to be one of the keys to understanding Gorey's 'gorey' tendencies. For it seems likely that in his own childhood the author was simply unafraid of the macabre. In creating challenging children's books for the precocious reader, Gorey may, in fact, have been answering the call of his child self. The five-year old Gorey would be unlikely to have enjoyed *Pat the Bunny*, but *The Beastly Baby* alongside the works of Stoker and Hugo, would seem a more thematically cohesive assembly of titles.

Gorey's sophisticated approach to childhood literature has allowed many of his books to appeal to a wide variety of age groups. Selma Lanes suggests that, among adults, there is an appeal to his books because adults experience his stories just as children might:

Gorey succeeds admirably in reducing sophisticated adult readers to the state of helpless bafflement and incomprehension so often experienced by small children. Slowly, like that child, the reader gains whatever mastery is possible over this work, and his victory parallels a child's as he imposes whatever fragmentary logic and sense he can on the enigma at hand. It is an exotic and cerebral entertainment, with Gorey forcing his audience to experience the world anew [. . .] . (6)

For adolescents, there is an attractive blend of sophistication and outrageousness. Lurie described Gorey's fan base as age thirteen and up, (20) and Schiff's comment that "Reading Gorey is like losing your innocence" (88) indicates that appreciating Gorey books can be understood as a sort of literary right-of-passage. It so happens that I discovered *Amphigorey* at age thirteen. As a male at that age, there was really no poetry or verse that felt appropriate for me to be reading. Everything was either too childish, like Seuss or Silverstein, or too boring (to me), like Keats and Longfellow. Gorey was a revelation. He was gross, offbeat and sophisticated, and I remember feeling somewhat proud that I was mature enough to appreciate his humor. It was a book I could confidently carry around at school and not feel embarrassed by it. *Amphigorey* is probably one of the main reasons I decided to pursue a career as a writer.

Once asked who he thought his work appealed to, Gorey noted, "There are a lot of kids who like my work" (qtd. in "Interview," Solod 97), a fact Brown, Anderson and Apseloff all attest to. And there are a number of reasons that the child reader may be drawn to his work. Apseloff and Anderson suggest that some children today, when faced with an endless procession of happy endings, view Gorey's verses, in contrast, as parody. Thus, by embracing his texts, the child is able to demonstrate his or her maturity and "[deliver] a fatal blow to babyhood" (171).

VIOLENCE, AGGRESSION AND CAUTIONARY TALES

It might also be noted that a violent text may hold a special allure for children. Diana Gainer, in *Eeny Meeny Miney Mo: Violence and Other Elements in Children's Rhymes* reports on her content analysis of several British and American nursery rhyme collections, concluding, "In all collections, published and unpublished, violence is the most frequent element" (45). She also adds that among children, "violence is the most favored element" (46). Admittedly, however, some of the violent images in Gorey's works are reasons to doubt his status as an author appropriate for young readers. Even if one can begin to pick and choose which titles are appropriate for children,¹ just knowing that Gorey drew the illustration for "K is for Kate, who was struck with an axe" in *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* is almost enough to make one throw in the towel. I asked Maurice Sendak if he felt that Gorey had ever crossed the line or gone too far. His response, though subjective, well illustrates the adamant posture many of Gorey's defenders assume:

No. Not possible. Not possible. He was so totally in control. And he was so elegant and he was so refined. I mean that in the best possible sense... his total sense of torque and his humanity and his generosity and his lovingness prevents him ever from making a mistake... his taste prevented him. It always prevented him from making a faux pas. (Sendak – Interview)

¹ Please see Appendix D (Content Analysis).

It is only when one begins to understand how firmly Edward Gorey believed that children would not be bothered by violent images that one can begin to understand his motivation and, perhaps, forgive him his supposed offences. As Sibley reported in *The Independent*, Gorey “resolutely refused to believe that youngsters were easily scared by the sinister or bloodthirsty” (R-6). In writing about Gorey, Henry Allen, in the *Washington Post*, agreed with the author’s outlook and added “Children, in fact, love ghastliness and morbidity, especially if they aren’t prompted to recoil in sentimental horror by parents or educators” (C-8). Gorey understood that, historically, children’s literature often embraced the sinister, and therefore he was not convinced that any of his stories were inappropriate for children. If we accept this view, then even *The Loathsome Couple* begins more to resemble one of the darker Grimm fairy tales than anything else. Is there really much of a difference between an “undesirable villa” harboring child serial killers, as in Gorey’s tale, and a secluded cottage harboring a witch who eats children, as in Grimm? Both texts can operate as cautionary tales, a genre that one expects will depict a fictive danger understood as representative of a real danger.

Of course, like Gorey’s tales, the appropriateness of Grimm’s have also been scrutinized. As Gorey’s child-friendly *Doubtful Guest* compares to his more sophisticated *Loathsome Couple*, likewise Grimm’s *Frog Prince*, for example, compares to the oft omitted, and very bloody, *Almond Tree*. Gorey’s work came of age in a time when the popular ‘Disneyfication’ of traditional fairy tales resulted in many an unhappy ending being rewritten to close with a more cheerful “happily ever after.” Disney’s *Little Mermaid* is the perfect example, in which a wedding replaces Anderson’s complex and melancholic resolution. Yet if we compare the works of Gorey and the tales of Grimm

we may note the similarity that while current definitions of 'children's literature' would suggest that neither collection seems wholly appropriate for children, it is likely that this judgment represents the opinion of the adult and not that of the child.

In examining Gorey's appeal to the young, it should also be noted that some youth may be reacting to the reality in his books, and particularly, to the honesty with which Gorey depicts danger. His work has frequent depictions of certain tangible fears that many children consider very real. It is perhaps important to stress this point. It is not necessarily the macabre--the *Goosebumps*--tendencies of Gorey's texts that attract children. Gorey notes:

I think a lot of my work has to do with reality. I think of my stuff as quite real [. . .] Fantasy I've always found a word I don't much care for [. . .] It annoys me to be stuck with [the macabre label]. What I'm really doing is something else entirely [. . .] I write about everyday life. (qtd. in Theroux 6, 65)

The truths contemplated in Gorey's books--the brutal truths--have as much to do with children's failings and fears as with those of adults. Aside from active participation in a war, childhood is potentially the most violent time in the average person's life. Bicycle accidents, jungle gym mishaps and collapsing tree forts are standard events of childhood. For the young, then, there is the constant specter of physical danger, and for this reason, Gorey's works, such as the bouncing, rhythmic *Gashlycrumb Tinies*, (in which Amy falls down the stairs, Earnest chokes on a peach and Ida drowns in a lake) appear situated within the realm of the possible. Another brutal truth of childhood is violence among children. Skirmishes with siblings, fights in the schoolyard and even roughhousing that goes too far are, again, very real and present dangers for the average child.

Theroux points out that another appeal to Gorey's work may be found in the fact that, "we all live closer to our deficiencies than to our dreams" (7). Children are no exception to this rule. In fact, according to Gorey, children live much closer to their 'deficiencies' than is commonly admitted:

When I was twelve, I read a book called *A High Wind in Jamaica* by Richard Hughes. In it, good-natured pirates rescue some kids from a hurricane. But in the end the kids are responsible for having the pirates hanged. That killed the myth about innocent children for me. It was the sort of book you never forgot, and you never feel the same because of it. I didn't need *Lord of the Flies* as a paradigm. (qtd. in Theroux 12)

The young child, then, may be drawn to an Edward Gorey's book for its sense of parody, its realistic approach to danger and violence or for a refreshing dose of brutal truth offered within. In identifying reality and danger as preoccupations of Gorey's work, we must note his debt to the cautionary verses of Wilhelm Busch, Heinrich Hoffman and Hillaire Belloc. Exactly how closely Gorey's style is tied to that genre can be made clear with just a few examples. Among the most popular books in their day, Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter* poems were a collection of dark cautionary verses such as "The Dreadful Story of Harriet and the Matches," first published in English in 1848:

So she was burnt, with all her clothes,
And arms, and hands, and eyes and nose;
Till she had nothing more to lose
Except her little scarlet shoes;
And nothing else but these was found
Among her ashes on the ground. (9)

Compared with Gorey's child-gobbling *Wuggly Ump*, Hoffmann's poem would seem by far the more graphic and frightening. But like Gorey's readers, Hoffman's young audience may have appreciated his texts as parody. Indeed, many today still fondly recall reading the *Struwwelpeter* poems as children--and apparently did so without suffering

emotional harm. Comments such as John Griffith's and Charles Frey's that, "after Grimm's fairy tales [the *Struwwelpeter* poems are] surely Germany's greatest contribution to children's literature" (149) indicate that there is an enduring appeal and importance attached to these dark cautionary verses. Indeed, Thomas Freeman in *Heinrich Hoffmann's Struwwelpeter: An Inquiry into the Effects of Violence in Children's Literature* reports that *Struwwelpeter* is "one of the all-time best sellers in German children's literature" (809).²

As mentioned in the prologue, Gorey had a special affection for Hillaire Belloc's *Cautionary Tales*. Published in 1907, Belloc's rhymes embody a doom and gloom not unfamiliar to the Gorey reader, as in "Rebecca: Who slammed Doors for Fun and Perished Miserably."

Her funeral Sermon (which was long
And followed by a Sacred Song)
Mentioned her virtues, it is true,
But dwelt upon her vices, too,
And showed the Dreadful End of One
Who goes and slams the Door for Fun. (Untermeyer 136)

Gorey's *The Stupid Joke* is not unlike the above examples and is about a boy who decides to play sick and stay in bed.

A dreadful twang came from the springs;
The bed unfolded great black wings.
While Freidrich screamed, the bed took flight
And flapped away into the night...
The bed came down again at dawn,
Both Freidrich and the bed-clothes gone.

Several other of Gorey's texts, including his translation of Alphonse Allais' *Story for Sara*, about a selfish young lady's fatal encounter with a tiger, and the previously mentioned, ever popular, *Gashlycrumb Tinies* are further variations on this theme.

² Freeman's arguments are outlined in Appendix B.

Gorey's ABC book, *The Eclectic Abecedarium* brings the art of cautionary verse to a level of perfection unmatched by his Victorian forerunners. Rarely have works of warning been accomplished with such dexterous brevity.

Be loath to Drink
Indian Ink

or

Beware the vine
Which can entwine

The volume also includes echoes of a more ancient wisdom literature. The verses read like proverbs from the bible, or the rhymed morals tacked on to the end to Aesop's fables and some antiquated Mother Goose collections. First, two examples from Mother Goose:

A hedge between
Keeps friendships green

Be always on time,
Too late is a crime.

(Baring-Gould 288, 290)

And Gorey's:

Don't leave the shore
Without an oar

With every Yawn
A moment's gone

See down the sun
When day is done

Gorey, of course, also makes room for the ominous:

The way to Hell
Is down a Well.

(All examples: *The Eclectic Abecedarium*)

EDWARD GOREY AND NONSENSE LITERATURE

But one must not judge Gorey's oeuvre as simply a reworking of cautionary verse. The editors of *Gorey Children: A Book of Postcards* tie the author more closely with another genre. Faced solely with images and verses depicting Gorey's "woeful urchins" the editors are led to the conclusion that Gorey's works are "Created in the literary tradition of nonsense verse and [the] somewhat surreal narratives of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear" (*Gorey Children*). As an author of literary nonsense, Gorey has much in common with many of the genre's chief contributors. His use of nonsense creatures like The Wuggly Ump, Throbble Specter, Beelphazon and the Raitch are derivative of Carroll's Jabberwocky, Lear's Quangle Wangle and even Seuss' Zizzer Zazzar Zuzz. It might also be pointed out that the word amphigory--the title Gorey chose for all three of his anthologies--means 'a nonsense verse.' Gorey himself indicated this in a preface to *Amphigorey*. In the interview with Schiff, just where Gorey is coming from becomes more clear.

The darkness, the sadism, the bloodshed--questions about these things disturb him the most. He feels misunderstood. His books aren't in the gothic tradition, he insists [. . .] What he's up to has more to do with nonsense, with Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear [. . .] [As Gorey said] "If you're doing nonsense it *has* to be rather awful, because there'd be no point. I'm trying to think if there is sunny nonsense. Sunny, funny nonsense for children--oh, how boring, boring, boring. As Schubert said, there is no happy music. And that's true, there really isn't. And there's probably no happy nonsense either." (89)

To the uninitiated, the preceding claim may appear too sweeping. Are not the works of some nonsense authors at least occasionally, and successfully, optimistic? Dr. Seuss comes to mind:

So...

be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray
or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O'Shea,
you're off to Great Places!

Today is your day! (Oh, the Places You'll Go.)

Purists of nonsense poetry such as Elizabeth Sewell would say no. The presence of optimism in a work of nonsense precludes its inclusion in the genre by the strictest definition of the term. Monsters, violence and anti-social behavior are among the most common themes in nonsense, from Carroll's slain Jabberwock, to Lear's numerous tortured ladies and gentlemen and Gorey's carnivorous Wuggly Ump, nonsense has always presented a boldly confrontational spirit, thematically, both dark and pessimistic in appearance. Children are not emotionally harmed by the presence of these themes because nonsense texts provide an emotional detachment from character. As Sewell explains in her seminal study *Field of Nonsense*:

The detachment which is a pre-requisite for the appreciation of violent humor, and which perhaps comes naturally to children, connects with one of the cardinal rules of nonsense: author and reader alike must remain emotionally unattached to the characters, and these in turn must be similarly detached in regard to one another. Unfriendliness and incivility are the prevalent manners. (194)

Like Lear, Hoffman and Carroll, there is in Gorey's work, an emotional detachment from violence. As Lear destroys the entire family of Discobolos and Hoffman reduces poor Harriet to cinders, so Carroll violently abuses the baby with a fire iron and cooking pots in the scene in the Duchess' kitchen in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Herein we find the thematic link between cautionary verse and nonsense verse. And while the two

genres may at first appear to be different animals, they share not only a detachment from their violence, but also an ability to produce a volatile and charged effect upon the child reader. Like Anderson and Apseloff, Gorey considers the two forms complementary and interchangeable.

The threat of emotional harm is lessened further by Gorey's tendency to use rhyming couplets. Rhyming verse allows Gorey's readers to maintain a certain distance from his grim subjects. Compare the following Gorey texts; First, a couplet from *The Gashlycrumb Tines*:

G is for George smothered under a rug.
H is for Hector done in by a thug.

And this line of prose from *The Loathsome Couple*:

“They spent the better part of the night murdering the child in various ways.”

Had Gorey written *The Gashlycrumb Tines* in prose it might have been as off-putting as *The Loathsome Couple*. By extension, had Gorey written *The Loathsome Couple* in verse, its effect might have been at once more palatable and more engaging. Elizabeth Sewell, Susan Stewart and Wendy Steiner have each suggested that the validity of content is threatened by its presentation in verse. As Stewart notes, “Nonsense poetry takes the traditional division between content and form (technique), with its hierarchical weighing of content over form, and inverts statuses to present form over content” (76). When form is more valued than content, a reader is less likely to be alarmed by content, he or she subconsciously (or consciously) using the necessity of the rhyme to reject the possibility that the text reflects something real.

Roughly half of Gorey's canon is presented in rhyme or alliterative short lines and nonsense phrases. Gorey's rhyming works have naturally been his most popular among

children who have long enjoyed the dark rhythms found in works like *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* and *The Wuggly Ump*. And while prose works of nonsense are also popular with children, critics such as Sewall suggest that nonsense is at its most pure when presented in verse. She notes that:

Nonsense much prefers to be in verse [. . .] [we may] expect to find Carroll's pure Nonsense in his verse, while the prose will provide the commentary [. . .] It is interesting that every time a set of verses appears in the Alices it becomes a subject for discussion and argument [. . .] [This] is one of the many features of the Alices which one unthinkably accepts; but it is rather strange. (20-22)

Consideration of contemporary authors of "unpure" nonsense may additionally help us to situate Gorey in his genre as well as suggest why certain critics have marginalized his texts. It is interesting to note, for example, that Gorey's rhyming *Doubtful Guest* and Seuss' rhyming *Cat in the Hat* were released the same year (1957), both books concerning themselves with nonsense creatures that mysteriously arrive uninvited and proceed to turn a house upside-down. While Seuss' Cat balances a fishbowl on his head, Gorey's *Doubtful Guest* wrenches the horn off the new gramophone. Despite this similarity, Seuss went on from here to become the most successful children's author of all time while Gorey's works have been regarded with suspicion and were quarantined to the realm of adult literature. One difference, of course, between *The Doubtful Guest* and *The Cat in the Hat* is that Seuss has resolved his story: everything is put back to normal and the Cat leaves. Gorey's *Doubtful Guest*, however, "has shown no intention of going away."

In a 1998 interview on National Public Radio, Christopher Lydon asked Gorey about the connection between fantasy and nonsense. His answer demonstrates both

Gorey's knowledge of nonsense criticism and reveals a hint of frustration with Seuss'

Cat:

Oh, dear. There is a book by Elizabeth Sewell [*Field of Nonsense*] which was the best book on nonsense I've ever read. It was mostly about Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. *Alice* and Lear's limericks are everything in nonsense, but they have a connection with sense. Whereas fantasy seems to be totally arbitrary at its worst. You know, you can just think up something odd. Or you can start with the endless numbers of children's books which are stuck together with the first rhyme that comes into somebody's head for an animal's name or something. Well, I don't wish to denigrate Dr. Seuss, but I mean, you know, '*The Cat in the Hat*.' ('Interview' 226)

Both Seuss' and Gorey's illustrations of children's faces have often been described as "impish," indicting that the two illustrators shared a perspective on the best way to depict the look of an innocent child. The fact that, like Lear and Carroll, neither Seuss nor Gorey had children of their own, may further link them insofar as their insights into children were largely based on their personal memories of childhood, and less perhaps on direct, personal observation of the next generation. While Lear and Carroll had child friends, neither author experienced a parental bond with them. With Lear, Carroll and Gorey, this detachment from a bond to one's own children may have resulted in a less urgent, or less immediate, need to place optimistic messages in their verses. For Seuss this was not the case. In fact, what separates Seuss from Gorey most significantly is the happiness and optimism pervading Seuss' work; that, and the fact that Seuss was willing to go on book tours, may have made all the difference.

To further demonstrate Gorey's vital connection to nonsense verse we might note that one of his single greatest influences was Edward Lear. He apparently had a lifelong interest in Lear's work and identified with him in many ways. One could look to a verse

from Lear's *Dong With the Luminous Nose* to get a taste for the brooding melancholy that so inspired Gorey.

Till morning came of that hateful day
When the Jumblies sailed their sieve away
And the Dong was left on the cruel shore
Gazing – gazing – for evermore,

A similar mood is achieved in Gorey's *The Iron Tonic*:

The Light is fading from the day. The rest is darkness and dismay.
They've gone and left it all alone: An absolutely useless stone.

Gorey's intimate connection to Lear is further established by the fact that Gorey's drawing's of Lear's poems were considered by many to be the illustrator's defining moment. Gorey's illustrations were praised as "the most inventive and tonally complex of his drawings" (Ross 51) and *The London Times* reported that "Gorey's greatest achievement was to provide Lear's *The Jumblies* and *The Dong With the Luminous Nose* with drawings that match the atmosphere of poems so resistant to illustration" ("Edward Gorey, Eccentric" 25). Alison Lurie saw a deep connection between the two authors and noted that the "overall effect" [of an Edward Gorey poem] "is not tragic, but comic, just as it is in the work of Edward Lear, whom Gorey greatly admired" (20). And as Hendrik van Leeuwen points out, "the two certainly exhibit similarities, such as the sing-songy musicality of the verse, the use of playful rhymes and the (nonsensical) limerick form, and in a fascination with dance" (80). Brown has even suggested Gorey's beard was worn, in part, in emulation of Lear.

Van Leeuwen, however, believes that Gorey goes too far in his blackness and suggests that the lack of optimism in Gorey's work points to a difference between Gorey and the fathers of the nonsense tradition. "Gorey is blacker than Lear... He does not

exhibit the hilarity of paradoxical reason, but rather the nullity of paradoxical emotion” (80). However, according to Sewell’s much celebrated definition of nonsense, Gorey is in fact a nonsense purist precisely because of his “blackness,” as evidenced by the presence of emotional detachment, violent humor, and the inherent unfriendliness and incivility of his texts. I believe van Leeuwen may be making the mistake of looking at Gorey’s canon in whole--as presented in the anthologies--as opposed to considering only those works of Gorey’s we might naturally be inclined to share with our children. In making this separation Gorey’s texts become less sinister and appear more humorously macabre. Indeed, as Anderson and Apseloff argue, Gorey is beholden to a particular brand of humorous, yet macabre nonsense: “Edward Gorey seems to have inherited the role of chief propagator of eerie nonsense” (35). In this way we may liken Gorey to contemporary cartoonists Charles Addams and Gary Larson. In so doing, we have found two more authors who, like Grimm and Gorey, are accepted as appropriate for adults but whose collected works are regarded with apprehension when children begin to show an interest.

In attempting to further debunk Gorey as a member of the “nonsense club,” van Leeuwen additionally suggests that Gorey is not wholly in the nonsense tradition because, as he sees it, “in Gorey’s work, text and picture diverge technically” (80) and “The extreme aesthetics of the pen and ink drawings [. . .] deprive the grusomeness of its gravity [. . .]” (79). van Leeuwen is now responding to the mores of the nonsense purist, who traditionally asserts that nonsense illustrations should appear off-handed, like hasty scribbles, as in the drawings of Edward Lear, G. K. Chesterton, James Thurber or Shel Silverstein. Simply observing the work of John Tenniel, however, whom Gorey

greatly admired, weakens van Leeuwen's argument. For, what nonsense drawings are better known or more highly regarded than Tenniel's detailed and often eerie black and white illustrations? Indeed, many believe that Gorey's illustrations not only perfectly complement their texts, but are, in fact, clearly in the nonsense tradition because they add a significant layer of mystery that works to demand creative interaction with the reader. Scholars such as Lisa Ede and Jane Doonan argue that the illustrations for the works of Lear and Carroll were especially effective in their predilection for the creation of a divergence in meaning between illustration and text that served to produce a heightened level of reader participation. In chapter two of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Tenniel's interpretation of the heroine floundering in the stream functions very like a Gorey illustration. This densely crosshatched black and white drawing depicts a struggling Alice in the water. Upon close examination, this illustration suddenly takes on an eerie element. Is Alice staring in horror at something out of frame? What she *might* be seeing is never explained in the text. Gorey's illustrations for *The Sinking Spell* have a similar effect. In this story, Gorey's verses describe a strange visitor to a household, and though he shows us the puzzled looks of the inhabitants, you never actually get to see the creature at which they stare. This tension between text and illustration is the final element linking Gorey to the fathers of literary nonsense. Everything seems to indicate that when we are dealing with Gorey, we are dealing with nonsense literature.

Much has been written on the benefits of nonsense verse on the young mind. Anderson and Apseloff go to great lengths to successfully suggest that "[a] profound relationship exists between the nonsense tradition and children's progress in speaking, reading and writing" (60). Anderson and Apseloff cast a wider net than a nonsense purist

would allow, but in so doing, provide us with a general understanding of the beneficial functions of certain aspects of nonsense literature, regardless of whether those aspects are presented in the confines of an optimistic text or not. Central to the language learning experience is an experimental babbling stage that nonsense texts from Mother Goose to Dr. Seuss have always reinforced and encouraged. It is apparently very useful and liberating for a child to learn to say “hickory dickory dock” for example, or “Derry Down Derry” in the case of Lear, or “Bunglebung Bridge... across Boober Bay at Bumm Ridge” (*Did I Ever...*) as with Seuss. With Gorey we find many like examples such as the following alliterative lines from *The Raging Tide*:

Skrimp thwacked Figbash with a dishmop
Figbash scattered cracker crumbs on Hooglyboo (2- 3)

Or as in *The Utter Zoo*:

The Boggerslosh conceals itself
In back of bottles on the shelf.

And in the names of many of Gorey’s fantasy creatures we find language at its most challenging, such as the Ippagoggy, the Jelbislop, the Ombledroom the Quingawaga and the Wambulus from *The Utter Zoo*.

Further, nonsense, according to the experts, is in reality a hyper-conductor of sense. As Sewell notes, “Nonsense plays on the side of order, its aim and method is to defeat disorder with disorder’s own weapons” (122). Other claims are equally important, such as Anderson and Apseloff’s contention that nonsense helps children to understand that words can have multiple meanings, thus providing them an opportunity to begin to make sense out of language (67-68). In presenting readers with confusing scenarios, nonsense, in fact, trains one in how to reach reasonable decisions when faced with

confusing circumstances (99-100). It teaches lessons in logic (79) and helps to develop of a sense of humor (95). They also suggest that the preponderance of existential dilemmas depicted in nonsense texts can lead to intellectual discoveries (81-83) and that there is, in nonsense, a latent heretical mission that has the liberating effect of teaching children that the rules we live by are not inevitable (94). Concerning the darker qualities nearly always present in nonsense verse, Anderson and Apseloff suggest that “nonsense literature sends a conflicting message to the young reader; namely, that dangerous possibilities exist in the world, but through cleverness, particularly verbal ingenuity, disaster can be averted” (97). No less significant, and just one more of many other important claims that Anderson and Apseloff make, is that nonsense inoculates the child against narrow-mindedness (99).

The way in which nonsense texts achieve these lofty goals is highly subversive. It is, in fact, in the very obscurity of meaning that many of these qualities are unleashed. Faced with incongruities, the reader must attempt to sort out the missing links. The rhymes of Seuss, Silverstein and Prelutsky, all make more sense, relatively speaking, than those of Gorey’s, and thus, are less able to perform subversive functions. Seuss, with his carefully constructed plots, clear moral lessons and neat endings and Silverstein with his well-timed, humorous final lines are both more predictable. With Gorey, an ending is often highly arbitrary. In *The Lost Lions*, the last panel shows a man staring off into the distance. The text reads “He was told they had been sent to Ohio for the winter.” The reader is thus provoked to think more about the man’s future than of the ‘ending’ of the story. Gorey’s *The Untitled Book* simply ends with one more in a long list of nonsense words, “hoo,” thus allowing any number of interpretations as to its meaning. As a

nonsense purist, then, Edward Gorey is one of the few authors in our time to produce the volatile texts recommended by Anderson and Apseloff. As Wendy Steiner aptly noted in 1982, "Gorey is certainly the foremost nonsense artist of our day" (146).

EDWARD GOREY AND THE "GREAT DESTINY" OF NONSENSE LITERATURE

Writing on the subject of nonsense literature in 1901, critic and nonsense poet G. K. Chesterton, asserted that because nonsense literature is not allegorical, it is not only "a new type of literature," but it may represent a "literature of the future" (68). Chesterton's foresight is remarkable when one considers commentaries written nearly seventy years later linking nonsense to modernism, Dadaism and surrealism. Michael Holquist, for example, in *What is a Boojum? Nonsense and Modernism*, links writers like Joyce, Kafka, Beckett, Nabokov, Borges, Genet, and Robbe-Grillet by the mores they inherited from Victorian nonsense. Such an observation is important to one who wishes to demonstrate Gorey's relevance. For, in linking Gorey to writers like Joyce and painters like Max Ernst, we learn that Gorey is not merely a throwback to bygone days of Victorian England, but is, in fact,--through nonsense--a vital player in what are arguably the most influential art movements of the twentieth century. I will then briefly demonstrate Gorey's connections--via nonsense--to modernist, surrealist and finally postmodern art and literature.

Susan Stewart, Wendy Steiner, Juliet Dusinberre and Anderson and Apseloff have all explored Joyce's connection to nonsense literature. Anderson and Apseloff explain:

Nonsense is often an organized and coherent statement that appears incoherent on the surface and is therefore declared senseless by readers unaware of the design and intent of the author. Such literature can be the best of all nonsense. In the twentieth century, for example, Joyce and

Samuel Beckett, two writers of immense influence, use just such a technique. (23)

Dusinberre observes:

When Alice encounters Humpty Dumpty he perches blithely on the wall, convinced that he won't fall off, while she waits with arms outstretched to catch him, knowing that his future, which he thinks free, is already decided because "it's in a book." The completion of the nursery rhyme is the completion of his destiny, as James Joyce realized when he made him the symbol of a new Fall in *Finnegan's Wake*." (206)

And Stewart reminds us that:

Joyce's debt to Carroll takes up a full chapter in James Atherton's *The Books at the Wake*. Iona and Peter Opie have identified forty-six traditional nursery and street rhymes in *Ulysses*, and Mabel Worthington found sixty eight nursery rhymes in *Finnegan's Wake*. (52)

In an attempt to demarcate the literary boundaries of modernist writers such as Joyce and Eliot, Virginia Woolf claimed that "on or about December 1910, human character changed" (194). Certainly well aware of Woolf's oft-quoted statement, Gorey frequently mentioned or conceded in interviews that his books were situated on or about 1910. His introduction to *The Black Doll* situates the action "In the year 1910, more or less [. . .]" (7). It might also be pointed out that in the essay in which Woolf made her famous statement, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, she defines modernist literature by detailing a mysterious carriage ride that is--in many ways--a narrative passage whose qualities ring extraordinarily familiar to the Gorey reader. Woolf describes two Edwardian characters who are involved in "perhaps [a] sinister business" (196) who state several seemingly disconnected lines such as "It's odd they don't start a golf club there" (197) and "Can you tell me if an oak-tree dies when the leaves have been eaten for two years in succession by caterpillars?" (197) The male is described as "menacing" (198) and the elderly female is described as "very small" and "suffering intensely" (198). Woolf suggests that the

passage invites “Myriads of irrelevant and incongruous ideas” (198) and adds that the story ends “without any point to it” (199). Later in this essay (which has gone on to be regarded as sort of modernist manifesto) she refers to Joyce [read Gorey] as a writer of “calculated indecency” who is at the same time “magnificent” (210).

It is precisely in an attempt to create “Myriads of irrelevant and incongruous ideas” that Gorey designs his work. He notes that:

If you create something, you’re killing a lot of other things. And the way I write, since I do leave out most of the connections, and very little is pinned down, I feel that I’m doing a minimum of damage to other possibilities that might arise in the reader’s mind. (qtd. in Schiff 93)

Surrealism, a movement whose 1924 manifesto directly refers to Lewis Carroll, was also a main interest of Gorey’s. Max Ernst was said to be a fan of Gorey’s work (Brown) and it was not uncommon for Gorey’s art to be compared to Ernst, Magritte or Dali. As Dali chose to illustrate a volume of *Alice in Wonderland*, so Gorey illustrated an obscure Beckett piece, *All Strange Away*.

Postmodern literature may be described as those works that are self-reflexive; books that draw attention to the fact that they are books. And while postmodern children’s literature such as Sesame Street’s *The Monster at the End of The Book*, or Jon Scieszka’ *Stinky Cheese Man*, would seem at first, a very recent innovation, one can not escape the image of Alice waiting for Humpty Dumpty to fall because “it’s in a book” (Carroll 107). A postmodern approach to literature at once removes the reader from a traditional conception of story time while simultaneously increasing his or her interaction with the text. Gorey’s postmodern tendencies are readily documented as many of his works challenge how a reader thinks about books. One such title is *The Raging Tide*. In this book, each page has a line of alliterative nonsense and is followed by an invitation

for the reader to pursue alternative sequences rather than follow a traditional narrative from one page to the next.

If you want to get on with the story, turn to 24.
If suddenly you'd rather be doing something else, turn to 29.
(16)

And as Alexander Theroux notes concerning the playfulness with which Gorey constructed his books, “This one is wordless! That one is one-inch high! That one pops up! This one folds the wrong way!” (63). One title, *The Tunnel Calamity*, actually folds out like an accordion and cannot be opened in the traditional way. The viewer is forced to lean over and examine the interior flaps one by one, stretching the “book” to its limit in order to see every detail.

In 1926, Emile Cammaerts, in his *Poetry of Nonsense*, suggested that Chesterton’s ‘literature of the future’ would have such a liberating effect that he could “foresee a time when, far from being set aside as a trivial subject, [nonsense] will be considered as one of the most valuable contributions of the art of writing to the development and happiness of mankind” (73). As gushing as this comment may sound, the fact that James Joyce is included in the documented link between Lewis Carroll and Edward Gorey, suggests that, indeed, great literary events such as *Ulysses* can theoretically be connected, via a textual heredity, directly back to the development of the nonsense rhyme.

In *A Defense of Nonsense* Chesterton speaks admiringly of the benefits of a literature that ennoble doubts. Edward Gorey’s works certainly do just that, from the *Doubtful Guest* onward. In examining Gorey we doubt the narrowly defined limits of what is and isn’t children’s literature--we doubt that children are as disturbed by grim honesty and cruel reality as we imagine – and we doubt that we should be so fortunate as

to meet the likes of Edward Gorey again anytime soon. A supremely talented artist, a creator of haunting and humorous verses, knowledgeable in all fields of literature and art, erudite scholar of surrealism and Victorian nonsense, Edward Gorey is alone among contemporary authors who might fulfill the ‘great destiny’ of nonsense literature as envisioned by Chesterton and Cammaerts. And this ‘great destiny’ continues to be alluded to. At the height of Gorey’s fame, in 1979, Susan Stewart suggested the vital connection that exists between nonsense and progress in culture and society. And in 1989, Apseloff and Anderson suggested nothing less than the fact that “nonsense literature contributes to the civilizing process” (108). Included in that book are ample demonstrations of Gorey’s appropriate placement in that genre.

Gorey has left behind a collection of works that is the embodiment of everything we could hope for in great literature for children: rhymes they will want to memorize, lessons they will not forget, and stories that *make* them think--both about the world they inhabit and the very nature of the text they are experiencing. What happened to Edward Gorey--how his texts were marginalized and, for the most part, kept out of the hands of children--is a great loss to the field of children’s literature and children’s culture in general. In my conversation with Maurice Sendak, (who struggled with more success at getting his darkly themed children’s books accepted in the mainstream) he compared himself to Gorey by simply stating that “I had better luck than Ted.” When reminded that his works were, in general, also warmer than Gorey’s, he added “They were more like what people would think of as children’s books. Ted never had a disguise. But in an emancipated world he wouldn’t have needed one.”

APPENDIX A

EDWARD GOREY AND VIOLENCE IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

As I conduct research on Edward Gorey, those casually familiar with his picture books repeatedly suggest to me that the violence in Gorey's works preclude his appropriateness as a children's book author. Resistance to Gorey for this reason is common enough, I believe, to constitute a serious obstacle to any general acceptance of my thesis. Therefore, beyond the arguments contained in section 5 of my paper, I include the following three-part appendix. The first, a discussion of the problem of Adult Projection should demonstrate that the real fear of violent texts arises from the adult and not the child. Section two compares the emotional risk to children confronted with violence via various media and should demonstrate that there is usually no emotional risk for children exposed to violence in a book text. Third, I have conducted a content analysis of seventy-three of Gorey's books. The results of that analysis, when siphoned through the advice of the experts, should demonstrate exactly how many (and which) Gorey texts may be reasonably considered child-friendly.

APPENDIX B

THE PROBLEM OF ADULT PROJECTION

Rock a bye baby – on the treetop
When the wind blows – the cradle will rock
When the bough breaks – the cradle will fall
And down will come baby – cradle and all.

The above poem is, for many children, perhaps their first ‘literary’ experience. Imagine for a moment, a baby crib smashing down through the branches and the infant, terrorized, headed for an impact with the ground. Chilling, but acceptable material to millions of mothers attempting to sooth and comfort a child to sleep. Jump ahead two or three years and hear the mother reciting Mother Goose rhymes to her toddler. Jack’s crown: broken. The Children of the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe: beaten. London Bridge: collapsed. Jump ahead yet again to the close of the formative years of a child. Fairy tales about witches who eat children, wicked overbearing stepmothers and bloodthirsty man-eating wolves disguised as elderly women abound. Move ahead again to early adolescence and observe what Perry Nodelman has described as “children’s apparently insatiable enthusiasm for [the *Goosebumps* series]” (118) or the more recent success of the Lemony Snicket series. These are the literary moments of childhood and they are all violent.

When discussing violence in children’s literature critics often point to Bruno Bettelheim who, in *The Uses of Enchantment*, suggests that children have no problem

with violence in a text. As long as they are feeling safe and secure in their own environment, particularly if they are cocooned in the lap of an adult reader, children are resilient in the face of violence. This is the common sense view, and the view that has kept violent texts in children's literature viable for hundreds of years.

For some adults, however, this maxim is occasionally forgotten. For the adult, as the years go by, it becomes more difficult to relate to violence. Repulsion of it may increase with each year we distance ourselves from the age of schoolyard tussles. If a seven year old boy punches his brother, age six, the incident is considered quite normal and is likely to be quickly forgotten. If, however, a forty-two year old who is out walking his dog is punched by his next door neighbor, the incident is unlikely to ever be forgotten. Gainer would agree with me here. She notes that she began her content analysis on children's rhymes because "it seemed to me that [my younger sister's] rhymes were much more violent than mine. When I actually counted violent elements, it turned out that mine were slightly more violent" (49).

Thomas Freeman's arguments in *Heinrich Hoffmann's Struwwelpeter: An Inquiry into the Effects of Violence in Children's Literature* suffers from a similar type of projection. Freeman examines a text that, as noted in section five, is very like a Gorey book. In *Struwwelpeter*, poorly behaved children are subjected to harsh or violent treatment in many forms, including having their thumbs cut off--complete with illustrations of the resulting two large puddles of blood. Freeman's main objection to Hoffman's verses is that, as he sees it, Hoffman advocates "Guilt without forgiveness and punishment without reprieve" (817). Freeman believes it would be better to expose children to literature in which "bad behavior is controlled in a nonpunitive manner"

(818). He suggests that *Struwwelpeter* only serves to reinforce fears. Freeman, unfortunately, does not back his argument up with any studies that confirm his theories. He concludes by suggesting that “Questions such as these can not be answered with certainty” (818). And yet he does answer the question. About two-thirds into his essay Freeman concedes that

The fact is, that even before they encounter literature, children have already inevitably and unavoidably been exposed to influences which make it impossible for them to be ‘innocent.’ On the contrary, as Bettelheim has written, their imaginations are ‘violent, anxious, destructive, even sadistic’ (816).

He adds that there is “No point in trying to shelter children by censoring all possible violence” (816). The only sound conclusion he offers is very like Bettelheim’s, when he says “Its effect depends primarily on parental attitudes” (816). In the end, it becomes obvious that Freeman simply does not like *Struwwelpeter*. As an adult, he finds it shocking and offensive. Freeman only needs to look at the first sentence in his essay to discover the truth about children’s attitudes and comfort level with *Struwwelpeter*. He refers to Hoffman’s verses as “one of the all-time best sellers in German children’s literature” (809).

Alison Newall in *Schoolyard Songs in Montreal: Violence as Response* suspects that shocking schoolyard poems are spoken by children “as a violent response to the implicit violence of the machinery of socialization that seeks to transform the child” (109). “The pleasure seems derived, at least in part from the knowledge that the content violates both the rules of good taste and adult expectations” (110). She concludes that “Perhaps the songs continue to remain important to children because they recognize something that adults have forgotten” (112).

Recently two of the most important journals of children's literature scholarship produced special issues on violent children's texts. In 1997 an issue of the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* looked at "Violence and Children's Literature" and in 2000 *The Lion and the Unicorn* produced a similarly themed journal. In attempting to locate troubling 'texts' that might be upsetting to children it is perhaps important to note that scholars in the two journals found themselves turning to alternate media. Television, amusement park rides, and advertising were among the 'texts' examined. When actual books were looked at, the titles chosen were those that dealt with the realistic; poverty, inner city pressures, war and Holocaust memoirs, for example. Not one scholar in either journal discussed the violent nature of nonsense, nursery rhymes or fairy tales, the genres Edward Gorey's books resemble most. Rather than looking at this omission as an "omission," I expect the lack of attention has more to do with the fact that, among children's literature scholars, the truth about the innocuous nature of such violent texts is too well accepted for anyone to be able to offer any further enlightenment on the topic. The common sense approach precluded a serious discussion of the issue.

There were, however, illuminating passages to be found none the less. Perry Nodelman came closest to my interest in his examination, *Ordinary Monstrosity: The World of Goosebumps*. Nodelman suggest that "Goosebumps represents... the unseen and unsaid of culture" (123), yet a further indication that adult fears of violence in children's texts is a form of repression. Joseph Zornado in *Swaddling the Child in Children's Literature* would concur. He asks "what happens to the child-as-object when the adult-as-subject grounds his or her conceptions of the child not in the impulse to remember, but in the need to forget?... The end result for the child is repression. The end

result for the adult is power” (105). Jason Mauro in *Disney’s Splash Mountain: Death Anxiety, the Tar Baby, and Rituals of Violence* suggests that adults “[create for themselves] a manageable world” (113), a world in which the reality of death is stashed as far into the background as possible. Upon reading this it occurred to me that children, on the other hand, feel no compunction to accept or deny the reality of the human condition. Many children expect to live forever. Perhaps this is why adults need to distance themselves from violent images and children do not.

In Eliza Dresang’s *The Resilient Child in Contemporary Children’s Literature: Surviving Personal Violence* she quotes a fifth grader who has just read Maurice Sendak’s turbulent *We Are in the Dumps With Jack and Guy*. The child responds “I liked this book a lot, but some adults won’t like it at all” (134). Sendak notes:

The children know. They have always known. But we choose to think otherwise; it hurts to know [that] the children know. The children see. If we obfuscate, they will not see. Thus we conspire to keep them from knowing and seeing. And if we insist, then the children, to please us, will make believe they do not know, they do not see. Children make that sacrifice for our sake – to keep us pacified... it is a sad comedy: the children knowing and pretending they don’t know to protect us from knowing they know.” (qtd. in Dresang 139)

APPENDIX C:

READINGS ON VIOLENCE IN CHILDREN'S TEXTS AND ALTERNATE MEDIA

There is some evidence to suggest that violent images, when presented in alternate media, become more able to disturb a child. This is apparently particularly true for violence acted out on a television, film or video game screen. The difference in presentation between text and screen is significant enough to allow for a wide variation in how the material is experienced and interpreted. A child typically has much less control over a moving image and the size and reality of a screen image can be imposing. While a television screen can be as large as a child, (and a film screen many times larger) a child is usually a lot bigger than the book he or she is reading. Also, because reading involves a certain amount of labor, it is easy for the child to quit the process, while a child who is watching television can be passively relaxed and nearly hypnotized while the world blows up before his or her half closed eyes. A child looking at a book can see that the story is only made up of individually typed words and dabs of ink. Separating reality from fantasy in a television program can be infinitely more difficult – especially for young viewers.

In 1995 the United States Congress reacted to a plethora of new research that demonstrated a connection between violence on television and violence among youths. In November of that year, federal legislatures passed the *Children's Protection From Violent Programming Act* a bill that regulated the time slots when the FCC would allow

violent programming to be aired. The *Act* sites studies done by the Surgeon General, The University of British Columbia, and The National Institute of Mental Health, among others, and concludes that “After ten years of research, the consensus among most of the research community is that violence on television does lead to aggressive behavior by children.” (4).

Two years later, a less convincing case was made that youth violence was being inspired by the lyrics of rap artists and shock rockers like Marilyn Manson. Presenting only one documented case of a ‘music inspired suicide’ Congressmen met in an informal hearing in November of 1997 and basically announced to the media that they did not like offensive music; another case of adult projection no doubt. No convincing proof was offered that there was any connection between lyrics and any trend in adolescent violence, and no legislation was recommended. The current system of labeling albums with warning stickers was already in place at the time of the hearing and no change in the labeling has occurred since. Of interest however, were the comments of Dr. Donald Roberts of Stanford University who pointed out that hero worship (common among young fans of pop music) can lead to dangerous behavior. (Music Violence 35) Hero worship, however, is not usually a ‘problem’ for children’s book authors in the same way that it can be for rock and rap musicians. A book is something many children regard with suspicion, relating books with school and forced parental guided reading time. Therefore when something distasteful is described, the child is able to step back and think “yeah, right.” But if you worship Marilyn Manson, and he promises you a better existence in the afterlife, a troubled child might have more difficulty stepping away from that.

APPENDIX D

CONTENT ANALYSIS

I will now briefly examine the content analysis I made on Gorey's books.

In her Introduction to the 1997 issue of *The Children's Literature Association Quarterly* Mavis Reimer offers some criteria for measuring the impact of different forms of violent depictions. It is apparently important to "[distinguish] violent texts in general from those violent texts that privilege violent solutions to conflict or that distance violent acts from the consequences of violence" (102). Here we learn that motivation and resolution are important factors in determining the relative emotional harm a text might inflict on a young reader. Further, she adds that the words "Violence and violate require both an actor and a recipient to complete the action" (103). Another words, it takes two to tango. Thus, accidents and situations in which only one sentient being is present should not represent a disturbing type of violence (suicide excepted).

The Seventy-three Edward Gorey Books Examined for this Content Analysis:

The Unstrung Harp – 1953 The Listing Attic – 1954 The Doubtful Guest – 1957 The Object Lesson – 1958 The Bug Book – 1959 The Fatal Lozenge – 1960 The Hapless Child – 1961 The Curious Sofa – 1961 The Willowdale Handcar – 1962 The Beastly Baby--1962 The Gashleycrumb Tinies – 1963 The Insect God – 1963 The West Wing – 1963 The Wuggly Ump – 1963 The Nursery Frieze – 1964 The Sinking Spell – 1964 The Remembered Visit – 1965 The Evil Garden – 1966 The Inanimate Tragedy – 1966 The Pious Infant – 1966 The Gilded Bat – 1966 The Utter Zoo – 1967 Fletcher and Zenobia – (With Chess)– 1967 The Other Statue – 1968 The Blue Aspic – 1968 The Iron Tonic – 1969	The Epileptic Bicycle – 1969 Why We have Day and Night – (With Neumeyer) – 1970 The Chinese Obelisks – 1970 Donald Has a Difficulty – (With Neumeyer)--1970 The Osbick Bird – 1970 The Sopping Thursday – 1970 The Deranged Cousins – 1971 The Eleventh Episode – 1971 [The Untitled Book] – 1971 Story for Sara – (With Allais) – 1971 Fletcher and Zenobia Save the Circus – (With Chess)– 1971 Leaves From a Mislaid Album – 1972 The Awdrey-Gore Legacy – 1972 The Lavender Leotard – 1973 The Black Doll – 1973 The Abandoned Sock – 1973 The Disrespectful Summons – 1973 The Lost Lions – 1973 A Limerick – 1973 Cat-E-Gory – 1974 The Glorious Nosebleed – 1975 The Salt Herring – (With Cross)--1975 L'Heure Blue – 1975	Les Passementes Horribles – 1976 The Broken Spoke – 1976 The Loathsome Couple – 1977 The Green Beads – 1978 Neglected Murderesses – 1980 Dancing Cats – 1980 Les Urnes Utiles – 1980 Le Melange Funestre – 1981 The Dwindling Party – 1982 The Prune People – 1983 The Eclectic Abecedarium – 1983 Les Echanges Malandreaux--1985 The Raging Tide – 1987 The Tuning Fork--1990 The Stupid Joke – 1990 QRV – The Universal Solvent--1990 The Grand Passion --1992 The Pointless Book – 1993 The Floating Elephant and the Dancing Rock – 1993 Figbash Acrobat – 1994 The Unknown Vegetable – 1995 The Fantod Pack--1995 The Haunted Tea Cosy – 1998 The Headless Bust--1999
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I should begin by suggesting that in an Edward Gorey book, violence is synonymous with death. People do not fight in an Edward Gorey book, they dispatch one another in a detached, mannerly, often efficient and usually inglorious manner--or they are run over, hit by a train or they choke on a peach etc. Nothing explodes. People simply expire, often. Simply put, in Edward Gorey's books, there is a seeming preponderance of premature deaths and it is this recurring 'motif' that has led so many to conclude that Gorey's books are 'violent' and, thus, unsuitable for children. Therefore when I use the term 'violence' I refer almost exclusively to one style of death or another.

Of the seventy-three books examined death occurs or is mentioned or inferred in forty-four books, only slightly more than half the total. Of those forty-four that do depict death, twenty-seven have visual representations of a dead body, roughly one-third the total number of books. Of the forty-four books in which death is depicted, only twenty-

three of them incorporate violence in which harm is intentionally inflicted on one character by another. And of those twenty-three titles, only eight support the notion that violence is the best solution to the problem.

Of the books I might recommend to children, I identified seventeen titles which do not have any of the darker depictions of violence that Reimer advocates avoiding.

The Doubtful Guest – 1957
 The Wuggly Ump – 1963
 The Sinking Spell – 1964
 The Remembered Visit – 1965
 The Utter Zoo – 1967
 Fletcher and Zenobia – (With Chess)– 1967
 The Epileptic Bicycle – 1969
 Why We have Day and Night – (With Neumeyer) – 1970
 Donald Has a Difficulty – (With Neumeyer)--1970
 The Sopping Thursday – 1970
 The Untitled Book – 1971
 Fletcher and Zeniobia Save the Circus – (With Chess)– 1971
 Cat-E-Gory – 1974
 The Salt Herring – (With Cross)--1975
 Le Melange Funestre – 1981
 The Floating Elephant and the Dancing Rock – 1993
 Figbash Acrobat – 1994

Allowing for the type of ‘innocent’ violence found in children’s rhymes and fairy tales provides us with twelve additional titles:

The Bug Book – 1959
 The Beastly Baby--1962
 The Gashleycrumb Tinies – 1963
 The Insect God – 1963
 The Evil Garden – 1966
 The Osbick Bird – 1970
 Story for Sara – (With Allais) – 1971
 The Abandoned Sock – 1973
 A Limerick – 1973
 The Dwindling Party – 1982
 The Eclectic Abededarium – 1983
 The Stupid Joke – 1990

And a case could be made that for the exceptional child--who is at the same time, confident in his surroundings and eager to be challenged--an additional twenty-two titles could be added. These works would be considered perhaps too mature for the average child, not only for the dubious motivations and uses of occasional violence, but also for their surreal quality and challenging language.

The Object Lesson – 1958
 The Hapless Child – 1961
 The Willowdale Handcar – 1962
 The West Wing – 1963
 The Nursery Frieze – 1964
 The Inanimate Tragedy – 1966
 The Gilded Bat – 1966
 The Other Statue – 1968
 The Iron Tonic – 1969
 The Chinese Obelisks – 1970
 The Eleventh Episode – 1971
 The Disrespectful Summons – 1973
 The Lost Lions – 1973
 Les Passemeries Horribles – 1976
 The Broken Spoke – 1976
 Dancing Cats – 1980
 Les Echanges Malandreaux – 1985
 The Raging Tide – 1987
 QRV – The Universal Solvent – 1990
 The Tuning Fork – 1990
 The Pointless Book – 1993
 The Fantod pack – 1995

Of the seventy-three books examined, then, it could be easily argued that fifty-one of them are appropriate for many children. The remaining twenty-two books contain either a preponderance of unmotivated, unpunished or unexplainable violence--or are simply very sophisticated in theme and content--or are so surreal in their approach that they can permanently perplex even clever adults.

The Unsprung Harp – 1953
 The Listing Attic – 1954
 The Fatal Lozenge – 1960
 The Curious Sofa – 1961
 The Pious Infant – 1966
 The Blue Aspic – 1968
 The Deranged Cousins – 1971
 Leaves From a Mislaid Album – 1972
 The Awdrey-Gore Legacy – 1972
 The Lavender Leotard – 1973
 The Black Doll – 1973
 The Glorious Nosebleed – 1975
 L'Heure Blue – 1975
 The Loathsome Couple – 1977
 The Green Beads – 1978
 Neglected Murderesses – 1980
 Les Urnes Utiles – 1980
 The Prune People – 1983
 The Grand Passion --1992
 The Unknown Vegetable – 1995
 The Haunted Tea Cosy – 1998
 The Headless Bust – 1999

APPENDIX E

A FINAL THOUGHT ON EDWARD GOREY, CHILDREN AND DEATH

Colin McGeorge in *Death and Violence in Some Victorian School Reading Books* speaks of the “horrific” and multifarious ways in which violence was a part of Victorian age children’s school texts. McGeorge notes that “death... did reflect the social world of the Victorian pupil... a significant number of Victorian schoolchildren lost one or both parents” (116). This would suggest the possibility that the grim realities of Victorian school literature could have worked as catharsis--an outlet for unspoken suffering. It occurred to me how similar the situation was in Gorey’s time. Reaching his greatest fame in the 1970s and 1980s, Gorey’s texts depicted a preponderance of orphans, abused, and lonely or forgotten children, and all this during the time in our society when divorce rates were at an all time high.

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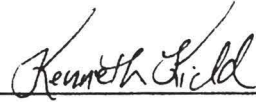
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kevin Shortsleeve grew up in Newton, Massachusetts, and graduated from Barnstable High School on Cape Cod. He received a B.F.A. in filmmaking from Boston's Emerson College. He is the author of five books of verse for children including *Thirteen Monsters Who Should Be Avoided*, which was listed as a *Kid's Pick of the List* by the American Booksellers Association. His essay, "Edward Gorey, Children's Literature and Nonsense Verse" (which is, in part, excerpted from this thesis) appeared in the spring 2002 issue of *The Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. He has spoken and lectured on writing for children throughout New England, New York, Florida and in Great Britain. His commentaries on children's culture are heard nationally in the United States on the public radio program *Recess!*. In the Fall of 2002, he will begin a Ph.D. track at Keble College, University of Oxford.

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts.



Kenneth Kidd, Chairman
Assistant Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts.



John Cech
Professor of English

This thesis was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Dean of Graduate School