Challenging the Norm?

The Female Grotesque in
Barbara Gowdy’s *We So Seldom Look On Love*

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Presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Gender and Diversity

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Academic year 2017-2018

24021 words
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“I think that all desire is desire for transformation, and that all transformation — all movement, all process — happens because life turns into death”

(Barbara Gowdy in We So Seldom Look On Love - “We So Seldom Look On Love” p.187)
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1. Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisors Professor Bekers and Professor Arteel, for guiding me safely through my analyses and for their essential and inspiring hints, readings and feedback. Further, I wish to thank my parents for their mental support and for giving me the opportunity to still read for a master’s in Gender and Diversity after my academic studies in Linguistics and Literature and my Teacher’s Training. Finally, I am also grateful to my friends for providing the necessary distraction.

2. Abstract

This master’s paper presents an in-depth analysis of the grotesque female bodies in the short stories “Body and Soul”, “Sylvie”, “Ninety-three Million Miles Away”, “We So Seldom Look On Love” and “Flesh of My Flesh” from the collection We So Seldom Look On Love (1992), by the Canadian author Barbara Gowdy. In these stories Gowdy portrays female protagonists who transgress physical or behavioral Western norms. By means of recurring themes such as dysfunctional mother-daughter relations, medical discourse and sexuality, this paper examines how the transgressive protagonists react when norms are (almost) reinstalled and how confrontations with those norms possibly also push them back into old patterns. This paper also draws on different theories of the grotesque (esp. Thomson and Russo) and magical realism (Bowers). Inspired by (amongst others) Shildrick’s and Price’s Feminist Theory and the Body: a Reader, it reveals how Gowdy both humorously and empathically explores the female body, its deviations and sexuality, and how she, by doing this, challenges the normative conceptions of femininity and the female body.
3. Introduction

This master’s paper will start with a short presentation of Barbara Gowdy and will continue with the current state of the art of the short story collection *We So Seldom Look On Love*. After the theoretical framework on the grotesque, magical realism, the female body and the Western social norm, the reader is provided with an analysis of the collection’s stories “Body and Soul”, “Sylvie”, “Ninety-three Million Miles Away”, “We So Seldom Look On Love” and “Flesh of My Flesh”.

A word on Barbara Gowdy

The Canadian writer Barbara Gowdy was born in 1950 in Windsor (Ontario). Being fascinated with theatre, she started studying Theatre Arts, but ultimately became a licensed broker. When her first marriage failed, she started working at a publishing house as an editor where she was able to develop her passion for art and books. In addition to reading other fiction writers’ manuscripts, she started writing herself.

In 1988 Gowdy published her debut novel, *Through the Green Valley*, which was not a success, but after her divorce, she flourished and wrote her first successful novel *Falling Angels* (1989). Currently, she lives in Toronto with her partner Christopher Dewdney, a poet. In an interview in *The Globe and Mail* (2017), she states that her writing career has known a break as she has been suffering from serious back pain which has gotten worse since her last novel *Little Sister* was published in 2017. During that same year, she underwent a lumpectomy, due to a tumor in her breasts. This strongly impacts her writing career (np).

Her novels are internationally successful and attract a widespread audience. Furthermore, she has been nominated for many literary prizes and awards. On her website, one can read that her works have been acknowledged in twenty-four countries and that some even have been adapted to screen (np).

Her first successful novel, *Falling Angels* (1989) describes a dysfunctional family in Canada during the Cold war (in 1969). The authoritarian father forces his alcoholic wife and his three daughters to live in an underground bomb shelter in their own backyard. They have to live there for two weeks to practice for possible upcoming wars caused by Russian atomic bombs. *Publishers Weekly* (1990) calls this rather dark novel “scrupulously and evocatively wrought” (np). In 2002, this novel has been made into a film by director Scott Smith. The dark atmosphere of *Falling Angels* can be found also in her next literary work, which is her only short story collection *We So Seldom Look On Love* (1992). This collection, which was well-received by the audience, will be the main focus of this master’s paper. Gowdy here focuses on the extreme liminality of the human body, which might almost be considered monstrous. *Mister Sandman* (1995), another one of her famous novels, again deals with a rather dysfunctional family held together by lies. A disabled girl is one of the protagonists. The novel
displays the hidden dark secrets (such as the sexual identity of the father) of this family. This novel too, like her previous works, shows characteristics of the grotesque and “[t]he deliberate mundane takes on magical qualities” (The Washington post 1997). Czarnowus writes about this novel that “[t]ransgression (...) becomes an attempt of the body to go beyond the crippling effects of the socialization and consequently to be able to find inner peace” (232). This is a story about transcendence, corporeality and liminality. In The White Bone (1999), Gowdy writes from the perspective of a family of African elephants. According to The New York Times (1999), oddity and humor take up center stage in this novel and “keep the reader from reveling in Gowdy's great gift for parody and her even greater gift for sensual, gross-out description” (np). Gowdy’s next novel, The Romantic (2003) is a romantic one that describes the love between Abel and Louise. In Helpless (2007), Gowdy portrays the kidnapping of a nine-year-old girl. Her last novel dates from 2017 and is titled Little Sister, a novel in which motherhood and family life occupy center stage. This novel explores the idea of what it is like to be someone else, as one of the characters inhabits the body of someone else. In this novel too, the grotesque and uncanny are not far away.

Barbara Gowdy has been praised for her exceptional way of writing. According to The Globe and Mail, she is “one of the most inventive and important writers Canada has ever produced” (2017). As already stated, critics associate her writings with the grotesque, the uncanny and with dark or black humor. Another recurring motif in her novels is the quest for boundaries. She constantly explores and plays with the idea of normalcy and disability. The transgression of boundaries causes her characters to be rather unconventional, weird or freakish, as she for example draws on (physical) differences and abnormalities of the human body. Gowdy depicts the way her characters relate to one another and consequently tackles dysfunctional relationships. Both her novels and short fiction have caused controversy.

**We So Seldom Look On Love**

*We So Seldom Look On Love*, Gowdy’s first and so far only short story collection, was published in 1992. This collection, which consists of eight short stories, makes use of the above-mentioned characteristics of her writings.

The opening story, “Body and Soul”, displays a girl named Terry who is blind and has a birthmark on her face. An older woman takes up foster care of her and another girl, Julie, who is epileptic, overweight and mentally distorted. At the end of the story, Julie is taken away to live with other mentally children and Terry gets her sight back. The second story is called “Sylvie” and deals with conjoined twins. Sylvie has an extra pair of legs, called Sue, attached to her belly. Sue is ultimately amputated because of the influence of Sylvie’s husband. In “Presbyterian Crosswalk”, Gowdy portrays a girl, Beth, who lives with her grandmother and whose best friend Helen suffers from hydrocephalus. Helen dies, but unknowingly saves the life of a boy who had an accident by donating her liver. The next story “Ninety-three Million Miles Away” shows a woman who is masturbating in her apartment in front of her window,
being peeped at by a man across the street. These exciting moments separate her from everyday life with her husband. In “The Two-Headed Man”, a boy named Samuel has a parasitic head named Simon. This head has been bothering him all of his life and has prevented him from getting a girlfriend. At the end of the story, Simon is amputated, but will never fully leave Samuel’s mind. “Lizards”, then, displays an unhappy woman who constantly betrays her husband. Her daughter is beheaded by a van. In the midst of her grieving process, the woman turns out to be pregnant again, probably from one of her lovers. The second-to-last story, the title story, “We So Seldom Look on Love” depicts a girl who has a fascination for death objects. She turns out to be a necrophile, conforming her life to this ‘habit’ by going to the mortuary every day to have sex with corpses. Her boyfriend wants her to kill him, as this will be the only way she will truly love him, as a corpse. In the last story, “Flesh of My Flesh”, Gowdy draws on a newly-wed woman who discovers she has married a transgender in the middle of his transitioning process. She is gradually accepting the relation with her husband while she is still processing the murder of her mother.

**State of the art and research question**

This short collection clearly explores the lives of different characters that in one way or another deviate from the norm but have a strong desire to be loved. Gowdy sketches a ‘normal’ society/setting in which the characters have already accepted and acknowledged their status as abnormal or deviant. The remarkable and unusual characters depicted in these stories expose what is normally concealed: their body. Anna Czarnowus puts forward that “in the short stories (...) Gowdy resists the easiness of representing the disabled bodies as spectacles of corporeal fragmentation. Instead she focuses on those characters’ subtlety of emotions and their typical human needs” (224). She adds that even though these characters strongly deviate from the norm, their needs and wishes are just like anyone else’s and they fully participate in society. Maria Jesus Hernaez Lerena states that the reader “observe[s] the pleasure and punishment derived from the characters’ lack of control over their excessive or anomalous bodily needs and demands” (np). This collection shows us how “the body is eternally unfinished, unclosed, unstable. Behind this instability of the body there lies the instability of individual identity as well as the instability of the category ‘human’ in general” (Lerena np). Even though this instability comes to the surface, the reader does not “perceive a disfigured world” (Lerena np), as Gowdy does not see the characters as inherently abnormal or deviant, but as made deviant by society. This is reinforced by Gowdy’s non-judgmental, but rather empathic way of approaching the characters, which might leave the reader discomforted.

Justin Edwards remarks that Gowdy defies “taboos and push[es] the boundaries of love, [this way, she] is able to explore the relationship between reality and representation” (Edwards 161). Edwards sees Gowdy as part of the neo-gothic trend in recent Canadian fiction, as she draws on “the monstrous body, the grotesque and the fantastic. She “interrogates
“normality”, challenges (…) the fixity of the body and disrupts sexual conventions, societal taboos or gender-sex identities” (Edwards 163).

In the collection’s stories, there is a constant tension between opposites, as Gowdy plays with dichotomies such as the visual and the hidden, stability and order, normal and abnormal, sameness and difference,… All of the stories are connected to each other, as they share the same sort of energy and atmosphere. Some stories feature recurring names or subtly hint at the same events. These links between the stories remind one of a short story cycle or composite novel, which is – according to Paul March-Russel - known to blur the boundaries between a novel and a collection of short stories. This collection, however, cannot be called a short story cycle, as the individual stories are not sufficiently interrelated.

Charles May’s theory on the short story in general indicates that a short story has a “focus on a single event and a single effect” (1). Frank O’Connor, then, states that “the short story (...) is a modern art form; that is to say, it represents (...) our own attitude to life” (13). He adds that the short story differs from the novel not only in a formal way, but also ideologically, as “[a]lways in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society” (18). The reader is provided with a flash of life, as the writer has no possibility to frame the “totality of a human life” (21). Lerena does see a link between the short story and the grotesque:

The grotesque brings to the foreground the artificiality of selection and integration; the short story does that as well – having as a backstage the less conspicuous selectivity process involved in novels – and, in addition, we expect short stories to muffle the dramatic noises of human conflict and disarrangement (np)

In addition, Lerena states that the short story is the ideal medium to explore extraordinary and unusual situations. She adds that both “the grotesque and the short story leave a bitter taste: they make us hesitate when considering whether previous models we have internalized to describe or to narrate life are appropriate” (np).

Although multiple scholars explicitly link We So Seldom Look On Love to the grotesque, there has not been an in-depth analysis that focuses on gender, more specifically on the female body. This master’s paper examines how Gowdy explores, describes and portrays the (excessive) female body (and its deviating sexuality) by reverting to the grotesque and magical realism and by constantly playing with the idea of normative femininity/female bodies. Its focus is on the stories “Body and Soul”, “Sylvie”, “Ninety-three Million Miles Away”, “We So Seldom Look On Love” and “Flesh of My Flesh”, as these stories share many themes and images. Moreover, in these stories, the grotesque is particularly present in the female body. Those five stories draw both on physical as well as on psychological or behavioral forms of deviation and are therefore – both for Gowdy and for scholars - an ideal site to explore the

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First, the theoretical framework will offer some more information on the grotesque and magical realism and how these theories may be applied to the collection *We So Seldom Look On Love* in general. Then, it will become clear how the female body and the norm relate to this. The in-depth analysis of these five stories follows this theoretical framework.

### 4. Theoretical framework

#### The Grotesque

One of the main introductory works on the grotesque is Philip Thomson’s *The Grotesque* (1972). According to Thomson, the grotesque brings along discomfort, confusion and covers “the co-presence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable” (3), as it is “itself ambivalent in that it is both comic and monstrous” (5). There is undoubtedly a strong “affinity with the physically abnormal” (Thomson 9). The term “grotesque” has undergone many changes throughout time and many theorists tried to define it. From the sixteenth (France) and eighteenth (England and Germany) century onwards, the grotesque became associated with bizarre, monstrous and horrifying bodies. In his study on the nineteenth century, Wolfgang Kayser, a twentieth-century scholar, objected to the idea of the grotesque being just “ludicrous exaggeration” (Thomson 14) and mentioned the importance of the “monstrous, the disgusting or the horrifying” (14) aspects of the grotesque. The combination of unsettling, monstrous and strange elements with a comic touch is what makes the grotesque unique.

John Ruskin, a nineteenth-century art critic, too, distinguished between “the ludicrous” and “the terrible” in the grotesque (Thomson 15). Many theorists define the grotesque as either comic or terrifying. Thomson draws on the complicated association of the grotesque with notions such as ‘uncanny’ or ‘fantastic’. One cannot simply state that the grotesque is fantastic, as “it is precisely the conviction that the grotesque world, however strange, is yet our world, real and immediate, which makes the grotesque so powerful” (23). Consequently, a connection to the real world is necessary. Thomson insists on the idea that there are different instances of the grotesque. Nowadays, one considers the grotesque as “producing a strange and often unpleasant and unsettling conflict of emotions” (14) and the tendency is there to look at the grotesque as both comic and terrifying, as the grotesque has an “unresolved nature” (21) and draws on the thin line between both. For Thomson, thus, the main characteristics of the grotesque are disharmony, the comic, the terrifying, extravagance and exaggeration, abnormality and satire. The grotesque implies – according to Thomson – aggressiveness (“the shock-effect” (58)) and alienation (“something which is familiar and trusted is suddenly made strange and disturbing” (59)). It has a psychological effect and tends to produce a sort of tension and unresolvability, and at the same time can be called “playful” (64).

Another author who draws on the grotesque is Catherine Spooner. In *Contemporary*
Gothic (2006), she focuses on the grotesque body. Taking up the view of Michael Bakhtin, she states that it is

a body in process: a bizarre, exaggerated, hyperbolic body, fragmented and dismembered, distinguished by its protuberances and orifices. It is implicitly opposed to the ‘classical’ body, or that associated with the dominant worldview of the Middle Ages, which is whole, completed, smooth, closed-off from the world and from other bodies (66-67)

Spooner adds that this “bizarre body” is associated with a subversive underclass. She sees grotesque bodies as “physical manifestations of Gothic” (29) directly linked to “the abject and the artificially augmented” (29).

The abject is a recurring feature of the grotesque. In Marie Mulvey-Roberts’ Handbook of the Gothic (2009), Colette Conroy, who is referring to Kristeva, writes that “the abject offers a sensation of horror that connects us viscerally to the experience of repression and the process of subject formation” (106). As she is drawing on Kristeva’s theory of the abject, she continues that “abjection is an overpowering sensation of disgust and rejection that is caused by fragments and substances that cross the boundaries between subject. Mucus, saliva, blood, vomit are all examples. These substances (...) belong to both inside and outside and so form the connective boundary between the two. The point of separation is also the point of connection” (106). In Catherine Spooner’s and Emma McEvoy’s Routledge Companion to Gothic (2007), Kelly Hurley defines the abject – again based on Kristeva’s theory – as “being used as a synonym for debased, degraded, humiliated, despicable and so forth (...)” (138). The abject thus strongly disturbs order. Another feature that is inextricably bound up with the grotesque is the uncanny. In the Routledge Companion to Gothic, David Punter puts forward three main characteristics of the uncanny: the threatening unfamiliar, the idea of déjà vu and the evocation of the sublime (129).

As already made clear, grotesque bodies are “breaking down the distinction between human and inhuman, human and animal” (Hurley 137). As Dani Cavallaro puts it, the grotesque “undermines the myth of corporeal unity insistently promoted by Western thought” (190) and constantly “violate[s] the diving-line between human beings and other animals” (190).

Most critics, however, relate the grotesque body to the female body. Mary Russo focuses in her The Female Grotesque (1994) on this body. Russo distinguishes between “two currents of contemporary critical discourse on the grotesque” (6): one that focuses on the theory of carnival and the other on the concept of the uncanny. The first one, the “comic grotesque” is related to Bakhtin and his writing about carnival in the work of Rabelais, while the second one is based on Kayser’s writing (horror genre) and Freud’s writing on the uncanny. Russo declares that, in the nineteenth century, the grotesque was used to refer to something strange, terrible, criminal or remarkable. It then became more associated with the “uncanny”. Russo states that “the grotesque as uncanny moves inward towards an individualized, interiorized space of fantasy and introspection, with the attendant risk of social inertia” (8).
The uncanny grotesque is linked with strangeness and the body. On the one hand, this body is conceived as a “material body” (8). This conception links uncanny aspects of bodily materiality with carnivalesque ones as identified by Bakhtin: it is associated with “degradation, filth, death, and rebirth. [It is] open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with non-official “low” culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation” (8). On the other hand, the grotesque can also be related to “the bodily as cultural projection of an inner state” (9). This time, there is no focus on the materiality of the body, but more on “horrific dismemberments, distortions, hybridities, apparitions, prostheses, and, of course, uncanny doubles (...) [and t]he figure of the female hysteric” (9) in relation to psychic subjectivity.

These above-mentioned types of the grotesque always stand in relation to a certain norm. Especially the grotesque “as a bodily category (...) deviates from the norm” (11). Russo specifies that “the female is always defined against the male norm” (12), and as the grotesque is mostly associated with the female body, the ‘female grotesque’ might be considered a tautology. However, Russo wants to focus on the connection and specific relationship between the female body and the grotesque. She considers the female body as a sort of spectacle, an unconventional body, that is not in essence unconventional, but that is interpreted or seen as such by our way of looking at it. Furthermore, Russo explains that there are “stereotypical grotesques” (14) in Western culture such as the “Bearded Woman”, the “Fat Lady”, the “Hysteric”, the “Siamese Twin”,... that represent “contemporary social and sexual deviances” (14). These stereotypes, then, are associated with female body processes such as “illness, aging, reproduction, nonreproduction, secretions, (...)” (14).

We So Seldom Look On Love and the grotesque

Many critics have made the link between Gowdy’s We So Seldom Look On Love and the grotesque and state that the stories of Gowdy are “representative of the Gothic-Carnivalesque” (Staels 127) or belong to the “feminist grotesque mode” (Lousley np), whereas Lerena considers them more as realistic stories that have “gone astray” (np).

According to Hilde Staels, Gowdy mixes different types of the grotesque in order to “rupture the boundaries of the known” (125). She mixes the “demonic grotesque and carnivalesque (...) grotesque with instances of comic relief and humor as an underlying subversive strategy” (122). Staels states that “Gowdy uses conventions of the Gothic and the grotesque parodically to critique cultural anxieties regarding difference” (121). Gowdy uses this strategy to critique and question existing hierarchy and norms by which the characters are surrounded.

What is striking, is that she mixes realistic elements in it. Cheryl Lousley confirms that Gowdy uses domestic realism in all of her writings. The grotesque “is always a representation of a social formation. Our environments (...) are physical manifestations of social arrangements; they need to be “normal” (Lousley np).
Lerena agrees that Gowdy’s setting is realistic. Moreover, she considers the grotesque (and fantasy) as a version of realism, but a version that makes us question identity and homogeneity. According to Lerena, Gowdy “achieves [in most of her stories] a realistic portrayal of actually existing ‘disproportion’, deformity, or sexual deviance” (np). However, this realistic display of her characters does not mean that they are not grotesque. Gowdy’s use of the grotesque “disturbs our habit of looking at the human body as a unified and coherent whole by making it appear as a construct, a version of personhood that has deliberately gone astray” (Lerena np). Gowdy does so by drawing on themes such as stray children, (absence of) motherhood, metamorphosis, biological discontinuity, social misfits,… As already mentioned, this master’s paper will focus on the link between Gowdy’s use of the grotesque and the female body (cf. intra).

**We So Seldom Look On Love and Magic(al) Realism**

As it is clear that Gowdy’s short fiction is associated with the grotesque, one might as well put forward the question whether *We So Seldom Look On Love* may be linked with magic(al) realism as a genre of narrative fiction. In Maggie Ann Bowers *Magic(al) Realism*, it becomes clear that the term “magic(al) realism” is not easy to define due to its variation in application. According to Bowers, “‘[m]agical realism’ (…) relies most of all upon the matter-of-fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings” (3), it is “assumed that something extraordinary really has happened” (21). Backed by Zamora and Faris, she adds that it is a “mode suited to exploring … and transgressing … boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic” (4).

The mix of magical and realist features are “often considered to be a disruptive narrative mode” (Bowers 4), as realism “is most often associated with the tradition of the novel (…) in contrast to shorter fiction” (21). It thus appears to be typical for short fiction to be more associated with magical realism. Bowers also adds that “magical realism becomes a useful narrative device for expressing views that oppose the dominant ways of thinking” (52), something which is obviously the case in Gowdy’s short fiction, as magical realism shows the “cultural conflict between the dominant ruling classes and those who have been denied power” (68).

In her book, Bowers states that magical realism is strongly associated with Canadian literature. Bowers links this to the fact that Canada is one of the most multicultural nations worldwide and thus offers many opportunities for exploring differences and new ways of thinking. The multiple cultural perspectives in Canada might form a “mixture of opposing perspectives” (53) that, in literature, may result in magical happenings. This strongly depends on the cultural perspective and the interpretation of the reader.

The inherently subversive and transgressive characteristic of the magical realist mode is- according to Bowers – caused by “alternat[ions] between the real and the magical using the same narrative voice” (67) and because it “crosses the borders between the magic and
real to create a further category – the magical real” (67).

In a rather usual or “normal” setting, Gowdy depicts rather unusual characters and focuses on their bodies. In Gothic Canada (2005), Edward states that, to Gowdy, “the body is an accessory of presence, raw material to fashion and redefine, and a site that can merge with other forms of animal life or technological advancement. The body, as a platform for identity, can be transformed” (152). Gowdy considers the body as an unfixed site of possibilities which provides the subject with opportunities to act out performances in order to revise his or her body. However, this does not mean that the body is necessarily separated from the subject.

Whether the short story collection We So Seldom Look On Love contains certain aspects of magical realism will be hinted at in the analysis of the separate stories.

**The female body**

In Gowdy’s short story collection, the female body occupies central stage. Each story displays at least one female character in a rather unusual way. Not only do women, in general, deviate from the male norm and are they perceived as “the second sex”, a sex associated with irrationality, loss of control and disruption, at the same time, the female body suffers boundaries and norms imposed from society.

The normative female body is always determined vis à vis the opposing male body. Dale Stone states in her article “The Myth of Bodily Perfection” that one always strives to achieve the ideal and perfect body due to “our cultural obsession with the myth that bodies can and should be perfect”(413). This idea goes back to the beginning of Christian beliefs. In contrast to a man, “woman (…) was not created in God’s image (…), meaning that a woman is not perfect to begin with. So women have even more reason than men to strive for perfection” (414). Not only do women have to compete with the bodily perfection of man, an own female norm has been established as well. This idealist image of a woman’s body excludes all people that are deviating from this norm and justifies the idea of treating them as “other”, as they imply both “abnormal” and “disabled” bodies. This is not only very oppressive for minorities, “but ultimately for everyone, because it keeps all of us alienated from our bodies” (Stone 416).

Because of sexism, Dale Stone states, it is more obvious for women to live up to this idealized image, as the female body is locked into ideological obligations of how it should behave (sexually). In order to be normative, the female body is often seen or approached as an object. Lynda Birke states that the biological body is considered as fixed and unchangeable, whereas we should rather talk about the “lived body”, which makes one consider the experience as a social object in a certain context (42-49).

The sexualized or objectified female body can again be linked with the grotesque and magical realism. This link will become clear in the further analysis of the short stories in this master’s paper, as Gowdy displays different forms of deviating female sexuality that linger on the edge of what should be considered normal sexual behavior. Shildrick and Price point out, in their Feminist Theory and the Body: a Reader, that female sexuality has always already been
“linked in the dominant discourse to a certain excessiveness (...) and that marks the feminine as sexual in itself” (79). Women are self-evidently already connected to the body, while men are first associated with the mind.

In addition, as already mentioned, the female body is linked to the abject (cf. Kristeva), to biology (reproduction) and nature. Shildrick and Price state in *Openings on the Body* that “the female body is intrinsically unpredictable, leaky and disruptive” (2), it is “potentially dangerous volatility that marks the female body as out of control, beyond, and set against, the force of reason” (3). As one cannot easily categorize the female body, it “has become the site of intense inquiry, not in the hope of recovering an authentic female body unburdened of patriarchal assumptions, but in the full acknowledgment of the multiple and fluid possibilities of differential embodiment” (Shildrick and Price 12). This strongly opposes the male body that is rather linked to culture, rationality and stability.

### The norm

It is obvious that the grotesque knows its reason for existence in its deviation from the norm. In his article “Constructing Normalcy”, Lennard J. Davis mentions that

> the grotesque as a visual form was inversely related to the concept of the ideal and its corollary that all bodies are in some sense disabled (...) the use of the grotesque had a life-affirming transgressive quality in its inversion of the political hierarchy. However, the grotesque was not equivalent to the disabled (...) The grotesque permeated culture and signified common humanity, whereas the disabled body, a later concept, was formulated as by definition excluded from culture, society, the norm (4)

The idea of having a certain norm creates the idea of deviance as well. Everything that is seen as “normal” creates something that is abnormal, perverse or even pathological. One must keep in mind that the idea of a ‘norm’ is also strongly related to a particular time and place. Davis claims that, when differences grow larger, the norm becomes stricter. In this context he even refers to “the tyranny of the norm” (6).

Davis claims that “[i]f disability appears in a novel, it is rarely centrally represented” (11) and mostly associated with negativity. He adds that physical differences are mostly turned into ideological differences and that “the normalizing devices of plot (...) bring deviant characters back into the norms of society” (15).

It is remarkable that in each of Gowdy’s short stories the physical or bodily norm, set by Western standards, is (almost) restored, or at least alluded to. Science plays an important role in this process. Science is considered as a male source of intervention on the female body. The restoration of the norm is often the result of “harmful cultural practices”. This controversial concept is discussed by Longman and Bradley. Originally, this concept was
coined to tackle “forms of gender discrimination and violence against women in the Global South, and among minority and migrant women in the Global North” (1). Longman and Bradley – backed by Sheila Jeffreys - use the term to indicate all practices that

are harmful to the health of women and girls; they arise from material power differences between the sexes; they are for the benefit of men; and they create stereotyped masculinity and femininity which damage the opportunities of women and girls and are justified by tradition (9)

According to Jeffreys, this concept can thus be broadened to condemn western practices such as cosmetic surgery, walking in high-heeled shoes, makeup, ... as those are said to “exist for male benefit (…), [to] perpetuate the inferior status of women” (3) and are “culturally determined patriarchal beauty norms” (9), the norm of what a woman should look like and how she should behave. This again is contrasted with the idea of human agency (having the freedom of choice), culture and subjectivity.

A way to momentarily escape psychological or behavioral norms is explained by Turner. He claims that one can experience moments of disruption or liminality. Turner distinguishes three phases: separation, liminality and reincorporation. First, one might separate from ordinary social reality and enter an in-between moment. When this moment is over, one returns to reality (reincorporation) and the normative world. 2 These moments of transgression or liminality, as well as confrontations with reality, are explored in Gowdy’s short stories as well.

5. Analysis

5.1 “Body and Soul”

I foster the blind, the cripple said

This first short story of the collection recounts a period in the life of an older woman who takes care of foster children. It is written in the third person narrative and is described in scholarship as a story of “unfinished bodies and minds” (Lerena np).

Terry is a foster child who is born “bald, blind and with a birthmark covering most of the left side of her face” (Gowdy 4). She is nine years old and was left by her mother at the hospital, who was “an eighteen-year-old migrant corn detassler who left the abortion too late, mostly out of curiosity as to who the father might be” (4). Terry had been waiting all her life to be adopted. When she was left by her mother, the nurses took care of her, as no couple seemed to be interested in adopting her. Later, she had a foster mother, Mrs. Stubbs, with whom “Terry was taught to eat cookies with a hand cupped under her chin to catch the

The norm

The stray children that Aunt Bea is taking care of are all not living up to the idea of a normative body. Although Aunt Bea seems to embrace the idea of taking care of children with multiple problems, she does realize – at some level – the difficulty and, in the end, she has to admit that this care is too intensive for her: “Her daughter is right – she is too old for this” (Gowdy 41). However, she is overtaken by compassion for the girls: she calls Julie a “poor little motherless thing” (11) and is surprised that – even though Julie has the mental capacity of a five-year-old – she is able to distinguish between sugar and Sweet ‘n Low. In addition, when Aunt Bea hears a new girl is coming without arms, she cannot wait to see her: “What wins Aunt Bea’s heart is the sight of those two little wing-like arms flapping at one of her artificial arms (...) flapping and failing to grasp it, flapping and failing, and at last lining it up, slipping the stump into the socket, and clicking it in” (42). Aunt Bea, however, is not a good walker anymore (“in the mornings (...) her ankles were so swollen they hardly fit into her shoes” (Gowdy 10) and even though she is not really considered to be disabled, she seems to be living in her own world. She fails to adequately understand voices from the world around her, but at the same time is fascinated how the children are able to function in an “abnormal” way in a world that revolves...
around established norms. The difficulties that Aunt Bea is confronted with are compensated by the love she cherishes for her foster children.

Strikingly, this love and empathic feelings towards the foster children are not to be found in Aunt Bea’s rather cool relationship with her own – and “normal” - daughter and granddaughter. It seems as if she only shows interest in and fascination for her foster children. Aunt Bea’s granddaughter acts jealously towards Terry, as Terry is now “sleeping in the bed that used to be reserved for her” (Gowdy 9). Her daughter seems to denounce her mother’s acts and claims that she will “worry [herself] sick when [she’s] living in Saskatoon” (10), as Aunt Bea is – in her eyes- incapable of taking care of these foster children. This becomes clear to the reader as well, as, even though she is caring and affectionate, she is at the same time irresponsible and unable to safeguard the safety of the children in her custody: she accidently “le[aves] the burner on” (10), forgets that Terry has to have “an empty stomach” (24) for the operation,... . One can state that Gowdy portrays a mother-figure that is failing to live up to the expectations of a “good mother”. According to Abrams, a bad mother is a woman “who fail[s] to conform to social expectations of motherhood” (Abrams 179). Ruddick, then, defines maternal practice as “governed by (at least) three interests in satisfying these demands for preservation, growth, and acceptability (...) a mother typically considers herself and is considered by others to be responsible for the maintenance of the life of her child” (Ruddick 348). Aunt Bea’s daughter clearly is not certain that her mother can live up to these ideals. She does not trust her mother with these foster children, but at the same time, she is moving and does not prove to genuinely care. This unconventional mother-daughter relation is central to the constellation of the story.

Both Terry and Julie suffer mentally, as they are both abandoned by their mother: Julie constantly asks for her mother, sees her everywhere and Terry cannot wait to be adopted. Terry’s physical flaws (being blind and having a birthmark), however, do not seem to bother her. She seems happy the way she is. When Terry was born, the nurses loved her and “she hardly ever cried; in fact, she smiled most of the time” (Gowdy 4). With her first foster mother, she even developed a special talent and “became a high-strung child with fingers like antennae” (6). As Czarnowus states: “human bodies developing extra-normal skills and thus transcending the limits of a conventionally perceived “human”” (Czarnowus 229). She thus has learned to gain profit from her body the way it is.

This operation is described as a “delicate but routine procedure with an extremely high success rate” (Gowdy 23). Even though Terry does not seem to display the need to be able to see again, Aunt Bea is “confident” (23) that Terry should get an operation. It is the doctor, however, who “says she is the optimum age for the operation” (23). The doctor functions here as an intruder in their world who will medically restore Terry’s eyesight. Medical science imposes this operation on Terry and disrupts her life by installing a new norm; the norm to be able to see. Science, here, might be interpreted as being at the service of normalization and full of patronizing attitudes. Terry did not ask for this operation, nor does she seem to really need it. Aunt Bea does not appear to realize the consequences (“adjustment problems” (23)) of this operation for Terry: ““oh, well,” Aunt Bea says. She has special problems herself, if
that’s the case” (23). Moreover, Julie is excited for Terry: “Julie says, “Can Penny see yet?” She asks it every ten minutes” (25-26). Terry copies their excitement and feels “exhilarated” (23) and even reminds Aunt Bea that she needs to stay sober the morning before the operation. She thinks “everything will become clear to her in a few days. She takes it for granted that she will know how to read as soon as she opens a book” (25), while Aunt Bea starts crying, as she “always cries at miracles” (27). After the eye operation, however, Terry is confused and overwhelmed, “[s]he is suddenly panicky” (29), starts to cry (“she cries, distressed” (32)) and “waves her hands to keep Aunt Bea from helping” (30) and gets easily frustrated. Aunt Bea notices unsettlingly that “[h]er eyes look completely different since the operation. They seem smaller ... and older – they have the vague intensity that reminds Aunt Bea of old people listening to something difficult and new” (30-31). Terry even seems to be more focused on the fact that she is not adopted yet “not so much wounded as puzzled” (38). This new and unknown ability to see again does not offer her the reality she had expected (yet).

One of the major worries of Aunt Bea is Terry’s birthmark on her face, even though this does not seem to be a worry of the doctor:

The only real worry I have,” he says, “is how Terry will react to suddenly being able to see. There are always adjustment problems.” “You mean the birthmark,” Aunt Bea says (...) Even though the doctor has explained to Terry how next year a plastic surgeon is going to erase the birthmark with a laser beam (“erase” – that’s the word he used, as if somebody had spilled purple ink on her cheek), Aunt Bea doesn’t exactly expect Terry to jump for joy the first time she looks in a mirror. But the doctor says, “Spacial problems (...)” (Gowdy 23)

It seems as if removing the birthmark is more important for Aunt Bea than Terry’s ability to see again. Medical science, here, becomes more and more patronizing and starts to impose stricter norms. Having in mind the way Terry looks, Aunt Bea’s sole purpose seems to be Terry’s chance of being adopted. Terry does not suffer in any way from this birthmark, she even seems to love it: ““you know what?” she says. “What?” “I love purple,” she says wistfully” (30). One can consider this as a harmful cultural practice (cf. supra), as Terry is not physically bothered by this birthmark. It is as if now that Terry is able to see, she should fully live up to the norm. Removing this birthmark is purely based on aesthetic reasons and has the sole purpose of looking attractive to couples who are looking to adopt a child: “Aunt Bea realizes, of course, that more couples will be interested” (Gowdy 25). One cannot even speak of individual agency, as Terry is not the one who decides whether the birthmark will be “erased” or not.

In addition, at the end of the story, Julie, who is “as fat as Aunt Bea herself (...), had short white-blond hair in some kind of crazy brushcut” (Gowdy 11) and has “pale pupils, almost white. Aunt Bea had never seen eyes like that” (13), is taken away from Aunt Bea. Julie is said to “have been living with mentally disabled children all along” (41). One can interpret Julie’s return to specialized care as a failed attempt to raise Julie in a “normal” environment.
They tried to normalize her behavior, which did not work out. Imposing this normal situation on Julie is not what she needs, as her behavior will not change. However, a new norm is installed when she returns to this specialized center, as mentally disabled children do not seem to belong in this “real” world.

Another example of the restoration of the norm is the “armless” new girl that will replace Julie. “This new girl is bright,” the social worker says. “The only thing is, she’s missing both arms just above the elbow. She’s in the process of being fitted with new artificial arms, though, and very sophisticated mechanical hands” (Gowdy 41). However, the world in which Aunt Bea, Terry, Julie and the new girl live is a world in which the norms are not reinstalled yet. It is a world that still appears to be cut off from the normative world. At the end of the story, Terry’s birthmark is not erased yet and the new girl has not received her new arms. Still, one norm is already restored: the norm to see. The ability to see scares Terry, as she enters a whole different and new world she has not chosen to be in. This world in which Terry has gained eyesight will offer her new possibilities to restore norms. However, the question remains whether this is a world in which the characters really want to live or need to live.

**The grotesque and magical realism**

Throughout the story, there are different elements that can refer to the grotesque. The medical discourse and physical deviations in the story are related to the materiality of the body (cf. Bakhtin), while Julie’s disturbing behavior relates to the bizarre and horrifying descriptions of the grotesque defined by Kayser. Not only does Gowdy focus on this excessive materiality of the body, she also elaborates on grotesque psychic processes (cf. Kayser and Freud) of the characters. The uncanny is very present in the story, along with the alienating mental processes of the characters.

First, there is the image of the abandoned child. In his book *Gothic Canada*, Cavallaro states that

the image of the abandoned child recurs so obstinately in narratives of darkness because it symbolizes what adults have to keep on repressing in order to hold themselves together. Children are rejected more or less explicitly as a means of stressing the adult world’s ability to disavow its own inherent and still alluring infancy (150-151)

Gothic fiction has consistently elaborated the themes of abuse and abandonment with an emphasis on female deprivation (154)

Julie, Terry and the new girl Angela are all foster children and can be considered abandoned. Julie’s mother “had a drug habit and a long history of arrests for possession and trafficking” (Gowdy 15), while Terry’s mother was an “eighteen-year-old migrant corn detassler who left the abortion too late” (4) and who stated – right after giving birth to Terry- that she “coulda
had her at home and thrown her in a dumpster, ya know”” (4) when she found out that Terry was blind and had a birthmark. She left her at the hospital.

Secondly, there is the recurring image of the mirror. After Terry’s operation she constantly looks in the mirror, in which she obviously does not recognize herself and feels alienated. As already mentioned, Terry is more puzzled after the operation than before. Her own world is fading and now that Terry is able to see, the uncanny becomes bigger for her. The world is not what she imagined, but at the same time, everything feels oddly familiar to Terry, which is a typical aspect of the gothic and the grotesque.

Gowdy plays with this uncanny image throughout the story. Julie is haunted by her mother’s image and thinks every woman she sees is her mother. Furthermore, the description of Julie’s character has some uncanny or oddly familiar traces. There are many coincidences; Julie’s last name is “Norman” (Gowdy 14), the same as Aunt Bea’s dead husband’s name, and Julie’s mother’s name is Sally, and “[i]t so happened that [Aunt Bea] had a cousin named Sally, who used to teach school but who lost her husband and her job due to addiction to alcohol. She died at age forty, a broken woman” (15). In addition, there is something creepy about Julie that Aunt Bea cannot place. Julie has “pale pupils, almost white. Aunt Bea had never seen eyes like that” (13) and she randomly – next to her epileptic fits - shows weird behavior:

“Julie poked the eyes out of her doll” (18); “Julie scowls and sticks a finger in her ear. She pushes so hard that she groans” (24); “Julie has gone into the kitchen, taken a chopstick out of the cutlery drawer and stabbed it through a plastic placemat” (37); “Julie is stomping around the living room, the picture over the couch (…) comes crashing down (…) Julie throws herself on the floor and begins to punch herself in the head” (38)

Especially her “ferocious treatment of dolls” (Cavallaro 137) displays dark behavior.

In order to counter this darkness in the story, Gowdy elaborates on the innocence of the children and on the naïve way Aunt Bea deals with them. Even though all characters seem to be living in their own world, they have to slowly adapt to norms that are imposed from outside. The way they cope with this and how they discover this normative world is what makes this story extraordinary for the reader.

**The female body**

A compelling element in the story is – as stated above – Julie’s remarkable behavior, especially in relation to her own body:

Julie exposed her belly and rolled her eyes (Gowdy 14)

Julie shouts, and continues shouting it and exposing her stomach and breasts until Terry bursts into tears (34)
Julie constantly displays her naked fat body in a rather grotesque way. These acts can be associated with exhibitionism (cf. intra), but she does not consciously do it. Julie uses her naked body to express emotions of anger and irritation, as she has difficulties expressing herself verbally. As Julie is “as fat as Aunt Bea herself” (11), her body is already linked to Russo’s typically grotesque “Fat Lady” (14). Even though Julie is not physically deformed, she might – when she is mad – be considered a “mutant woman” (Russo 107). It is as if she transforms into a monstrous creature that evokes fear. Also, to describe Julie’s body in the most remarkable scene of the story, Gowdy falls back on the grotesque mode:

   Julie’s head jerks, as if she is sneezing. Red paint drips from her forehead. She holds the drill in both hands. Fred’s drill – that’s what’s upsetting to Aunt Bea. Fred’s paint. Terry screams again. Right into Julie’s head the scream goes, right into the hole where Julie’s finger is going. Aunt Bea brings down the knick-knack holder on her way to the floor (40)

Kristeva’s abject (cf. supra) clearly disturbs order throughout the story. This description of Julie’s epileptic fits, for instance, and her behavior are constantly linked to the excretions of the body.

Throughout the story, there are many references to blood. In the opening scene, a cat falls off the balcony and is dead and Terry constantly asks whether the cat is bleeding: “Is it bleeding?” Terry asks Julie. Blood concerns Terry. Eyes, she was disturbed to learn, can bleed” (Gowdy 3). When Terry gets frustrated with Julie who does not want to answer this question, she calms herself down and says “Bleeding doesn’t mean you die though” (4). Julie does not acknowledge whether the cat is bleeding or not and keeps avoiding this question. Gowdy clearly plays with the color red, which is “the color at the end of the visible spectrum of light” (“red” np). Terry is not able yet to see this color, but she does know that “[e]yes (…) can bleed” (4). This might be understood as a visionary reference to the disappointing moment she will be able to see.

Further, there are also references to sweat. When Aunt Bea meets Julie for the first time, Julie is wearing a sweatshirt that read “Don’t sweat the petty things! (…) Pet the sweaty things” (11-12). That same moment, “[s]peaking of sweat, her body was soaked in it” (12).

The above-mentioned scene (in which Julie who puts her finger in the hole in her head) is – according to Lerena - a moment in which “the grotesque and short-storyness converge: the freak ethos of looking from a distance at a world whose only seizable quality is its ‘looked-at-ness’, and the short story’s capacity to achieve finality just by presenting the character’s lack of acquaintance with some object he or she perceives” (Lerena np). Aunt Bea seems to be fascinated by the connection of a body, by the dichotomy of the normal and the abnormal or strange. The act of looking, then, can be read as a link to Terry’s ability to see again, but at the same time not realizing the real function of it, just like Terry. Aunt Bea too is staring at Julie’s body, but cannot fully grasp what is happening.
5.2 “Sylvie”

The second short story of Gowdy’s collection, “Sylvie”, is written in third person narrative and is said to be drawing on “the motif of bodies lacking unity” (Staels 130). “Sylvie” is set in the 1940’s and deals with the conjoined twins Sylvie and Sue. Sylvie is a girl that carries around an extra pair of legs with the “belly growing out of Sylvie’s own belly” (Gowdy 43). The extra pair of legs is called Sue. After a rather unusual childhood, in which she is excluded from social contact, Sylvie is intrigued by the freak show of M. T. Bean, but her parents strongly object to her seeing the show. On impulse, Sylvie leaves her parental home overnight, joins the circus and even signs a contract never to return home again. Every day she puts up a show, together with other “freaks”, in which she exposes Sue. After six years, she meets the rich Dr. John Wilcox. They fall in love and he buys out her contract with M.T. Bean. He promises her she will be normal again after the removal of her extra pair of legs. After they have had sex for the first time, it is decided that Sue will be amputated.

This story’s analysis traces how the protagonist’s body is portrayed in a grotesque way in order to question the norm. The focus is on the body’s exposition and the way it is turned into a curiosity. The norm, re-established by medical practices, will change Sylvie’s life forever.

The norm

As already becomes clear Gowdy opposes “the normal” and “the freak” in this story. The public opinion is contrasted with the perception of an unusual girl, which evokes empathy and compassion as a reader. In the beginning of the short story, the reader is explained that Sylvie and Sue are “Siamese twin sister[s]” (Gowdy 43):

Sue is attached to her. Sue is nothing but a pair of legs, tough. Perfect little legs with feet, knees, thighs, hips, and a belly, just under her navel, and the feet hanging to a few inches below her own knees and facing away from her body, that is to say, facing in the same direction as her own feet. She has no more will over these little legs than she does over her ears, but she feels them, the cramps they occasionally get, the twitches, anything touching them (43-44)

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the terms ‘conjoined twins’ or ‘Siamese twins’ are used interchangeably and represent “[a]n extremely rare phenomenon, the occurrence is estimated to range from 1 in 49,000 births to 1 in 189,000 births (...) [m]ost live births are female” (np). However, as the story continues, one learns that Sylvie and Sue can be called an ‘autosite-parasite’: “The surgeon explains to Sylvie that she is an autosite-parasite. “You are the autosite,” he says. “They – he gestures at her lap – “are the parasite.”” (Gowdy 61).
Indeed, on Wikipedia, one might find a similar explanation that confirms that the independent twin is the autosite, while the parasite is undeveloped and dependent on the body of the complete fetus (“parasitic twin” np).

According to Sylvie’s mother, she has to move constantly and stretch the extra pair of legs as she says that “otherwise they would rot and fall off” (Gowdy 44). During an examination, the nurse replies to this with “No such luck” (44), which immediately reveals the public opinion on Sue. When Sylvie was born, she was called a “medical marvel” (43). However, this is not the way her mother perceives this:

[Her mother] had a daughter who was nothing but legs. She knit blue-and-white or red-and-white striped stockings for Sue (Sylvie had to wear plain white) and bought her new shoes (Sylvie’s were second-hand, from the church bazaar). As if Sylvie weren’t there, as if she weren’t the one who felt what Sue felt, her mother squeezed Sue by her feet and massaged her calves and said, “How’s my baby? What kind of day did my sweet baby have?” (Gowdy 44)

her mother’s obvious favouritism hurt Sylvie, but at the same time she felt sorry for her sister, and she appreciated her own good fortune in having an entire body, plus at her sister’s expense, a second pair of legs, which, even if they didn’t work, no one else had (44)

Just as in “Body and Soul”, Gowdy seems to bring into play another atypical mother-figure that does not seem to be able to give her own daughter the love she needs. Sylvie’s mother passes her guilt for not creating two “normal” children on to Sylvie. Sylvie’s mother loves Sue better, which causes Sylvie to suffer from “survivor guilt” (44) and according to Lerena, the only thing she needs is a mother figure “that could connect [her] to the story of a normal world” (np). Not only did her mother refrain from showing Sylvie any affection, she also kept her away from the outside world (“A year could go by without a visitor” (Gowdy 45)), which makes Sylvie not question her extra pair of legs. However, from the moment she has to go to school, her mother warns her for possible reactions, as she already presupposes disapproval: “Don’t show her to anybody” (46). Indeed, when she enters school, “the children (...) parted to make a path. The look on some of the children’s faces made her instinctively shield the front of herself with her lunch pail” (46). The children are all fascinated by what makes Sylvie differ from themselves. Sylvie, however, does not realize that her legs might evoke disgust or repulsion, as “she wasn’t connecting her little legs to those looks. Her mother’s warning to keep Sue under her skirt, she had taken to mean: don’t be immodest, don’t show off” (46), as she considers Sue as an asset, something to be jealous of. When she tells her mother that if she does not show her legs, the children will “scratch and poke” (48) her, her mother reacts with “Then that is your lot” her mother shouted (...) Think of what I have borne!” (48).

As Sylvie’s mother does not want Sylvie to be confronted with other children, Sylvie’s teacher, Miss Moote, “kept Sylvie inside at recess and waited with her outside the front doors” (Gowdy 49) until nobody was there anymore. Most of the time, her parents do not come and
she has to walk home by herself. Sylvie is often left alone or “studied in the library or in an empty classroom” (52), which never gave her the opportunity to integrate or to grow up just like any other child. However, this experience of the confrontations with other children makes Sylvie realize that she will have a better chance to survive when displaying her body instead of hiding it.

Sylvie’s unhealthy relationship with her mother makes her feel alone and rejected and pushes her away from her mother. Still, her mother’s voice and childhood memories will keep haunting her whenever she has memory spells, Sylvie revives when she is surrounded by other people deviating from the set norm in Mr. Bean’s freak show. In order to make Sylvie even more fascinating for the audience, Mr. Bean renames Sue into Bill. This way, he adds a gendered and sexualized aspect to her deformation and will probably make more money as this catches the attention from the audience. From the safe, but loveless environment at home, she enters the capitalist system that offers her both a way to survive and the opportunity to connect with other freaks.

One of her colleagues, Merry Mary, has given birth to a “[t]iny, normal. Perfect” (Gowdy 55) baby, she names Sue, in honor of Sylvie’s twin legs. When the baby dies, Sylvie cannot stop crying and cannot “understand why she and Mary and the other freaks are alive, and a perfectly formed baby was dead” (55-56). By describing this situation in the story, Gowdy enlarges the contrast between the normal, perfect body and the deviating, strange body. However, this occurrence makes Sylvie accept the way she is: “The minute she’d laid eyes on [Mary’s] Sue it had struck her that it was all right being deformed if deformity had to exist for there to be such perfection” (56). Sylvie only accepts herself in relation to this perfection, as when perfection, Mary’s baby, dies, Sylvie is inconsolable. This contrast of deformation and perfection is also put forward with the comparison of Sylvie and her “resemblance to Vivien Leigh” (56). Even though Sylvie looks like this model, she will never have her ideal body. This contrast is felt by Sylvie herself: “On the one hand, Sylvie loves the feeling of being like everybody else, which is to say like nobody in particular. On the other hand, when she feels most like a freak is when she’s getting away with not being one” (Gowdy 56).

Finally, at the end of the story, the ultimate normative body is imposed on Sylvie as she undergoes an amputation of her extra pair of legs. Dr. John Wilcox, who bought her off, seems to be a perfect man, he is handsome and rich and wants her to undergo an operation. It seems like he bribes her into this operation by exhibiting his power as male and “normal” person who loves a “freak”. He buys her a “diamond-and-gold watch” (Gowdy 64) and “will consult with surgeons about an operation, he will take her anywhere in the world for an operation. He loves her” (59). Sylvie almost feels urged to undergo the operation, even though she seems to question it:

It is a miracle too big to question (59)
"I am going to be a normal," but she can’t grasp what being a normal means, other than that she will be able to wear the tight white wedding gown and to sleep on her stomach (61)

"Two legs do not add up to a human being," she says to herself. The night before last John said, “Just keep telling yourself that.” He said, “There is no Sue.” (64)

What if her freak memory is connected with her freak legs? (68)

These passages reveal that Sylvie is not sure about this operation and that she needs to convince herself to go through with it. When she is with him, she does not doubt the idea of an operation, but when she is on her own she is hit by insecurities. Moreover, she does not want to disappoint him, because he has already planned their future: “[t]hey are going to have four children. They are going to visit her father’s village in Portugal” (Gowdy 67-68) and he seems very excited about the operation. According to Staels, “[t]he doctor with the comic name imposes his cock’s will, that is, his rational power and normative gaze, on Sylvie in telling her that she can be normalized” (130). Sylvie is forced to fit into the “expected corporeal boundaries” (130). Staels adds that Gowdy’s word choice of “going under” not only means losing consciousness but also suffering defeat or destruction as a victim of the male gaze” (131).

This “normalizing” operation might be considered a harmful cultural practice. Not only does the operation involve risks:

the first operation isn’t entirely without risk, and there will be a long and not altogether comfortable recovery. But the follow-up operations will be less strenuous and will contain almost no risk. When the bandages come off, she is not to be frightened. The scarring will eventually be reduced by plastic surgery (Gowdy 68)

This is not a choice made by Sylvie herself, but rather imposed on her. John gives her the feeling that she should be grateful for this opportunity. Right before the operation, he points out to Sylvie that “[t]here are some big names here” (71), as if it the operation is something which is not granted to everyone. Sylvie, on the other hand, has always accepted her body and has even made profit out of it by working in the freak show of Mr. Bean. Staels concludes that Sylvie “mourns over the loss of Sue as the living, inescapable otherness within herself” (131). Her memory spells leading up to the actual operation already give away that, after the operation, she will have a difficult time coping with her new body.

**The grotesque and magical realism**
Staels reveals the connection of Sylvie’s body with the grotesque by stating that “Gowdy hyperbolizes deviance in portraying these circus freaks of the past, who are scientifically labeled as “autosites-parasites”, and who may be interpreted as a trope of people’s feared otherness within and outside the self” (130). Sylvie’s undeveloped twin Sue both represents the ideal girl who is loved by her mother Sylvie and the deviating part of a girl that repulses everyone. It is clear that, for this story, Gowdy relies most on grotesque elements identified by Bakhtin. Russo calls “The Siamese Twin” (14) a typical strange and monstrous grotesque body in Western culture. The strangeness of the body, bodily transformations and excessiveness of the body are central in this story and frighten the reader. However, at the same time, Gowdy mixes these disturbing and excessive elements with human emotions and is able to evoke empathy with the reader.

The exposition

Cavallero states that grotesque or hybrid bodies turn “their troubling anatomies into curiosities” (198). Indeed, Gowdy builds the story around the exposure of the “monstrous” body.

First, Sylvie’s body is exposed at school. When she refuses to show her legs, the children push her and lift up her skirt to look at them. Still then “Sylvie thought that it was because of her underpants showing” (Gowdy 47) that the children were shocked. After finally realizing that the children want to see her legs, she shows them if anyone asks. She thus exposes herself to prevent the children from kicking her. Soon “[k]ids brought their older brothers and sisters and their parents to the school yard to see her” (48) and the army base in school “took pictures of her to send to their families and to carry in their pockets – for good luck, they said, when they were shipped off to fight the war in Europe” (52).

Second, Mr. Bean’s freak show is the place to be exposed. She willingly chooses to go, as is was told about “the Siamese-twin foetuses in a jar” (Gowdy 52) that look just like her. Her parents do not want her to go and her mother say it is “[m]eat on display! That’s what I saved you from!”” (53). She clearly decided herself to expose herself and to become a professional: “In the back of her mind she had a plan to exhibit herself at diners in exchange for free meals and a place to sleep” (53). During the time she works there, her “abnormalities” transform in a source of income and create her independence. The other freaks are envious of Sylvie being able to pass as normal when she hides Sue under her clothes:

She knows that they want to hear how wonderful it is (…), but they also want to hear how strange, even unpleasant, it is, because passing is a dream that won’t come true for them. The truth is, it’s both things (56)

Being able to appear “normal” is what makes Sylvie stand out in the group of freaks, it is what makes her special and fascinating for them. She likes this, but she also seems to like to expose herself as a freak.
In addition, Russo – citing Ewa Kuryluk – mentions the “dissecting rooms”, which “emphasize(...) the strange juxtapositions of human and animal parts on display” (116). In these dissecting rooms, one is curious to find out what is inside the body operated on. Kuryluk considers these rooms as “grotto-esque spaces: “In the scientific grotto of the curiosities, the inside is turned outside and the dark secrets of the organic become disclosed as the bodily cave is opened up”” (116). Indeed, Sylvie’s body is exposed in the hospital before she undergoes the amputation. Everyone wants to catch a glimpse of her and Sue, even the nurses or other staff come in the hope to see something special. John wants to look at her, as he is fascinated by the construction of her body. He thinks her body is “[r]emarkable (...) Fantastic” (Gowdy 60) and does not feel the repulsion other people feel.

The ‘exposing’ idea returns at the end of the story as well. When Sylvie is preparing for the operation, she “is wheeled out on a stretcher to have X-rays, patients are lined along the corridors, waiting for her. She feels like a float in a parade” (Gowdy 70). Once in the operation room, she is “brought to the centre of what seems like a stage. John scans the rows of doctors seated behind glass in the encircling tiers” (71). Before she is fully stunned, she mumbles something, which “drew a laugh from the doctors seated in the gallery” (71). Gowdy describes this passage as if the doctors and surgeons are the spectators in a theatre who are watching an unprecedented spectacle. Exposure brings along the act of looking. Spectators are central in Gowdy’s story and represent the normal, the public that is watching the deviant.

Other Creepy and grotesque elements

The reference to death contrasts with the comic undertone of the story. Sylvie’s mother works at a funeral parlour and “[o]n Sylvie’s first day at school, she had pigtails with ribbons that “were cut from a Rest-in Peace sash” (Gowdy 45). Her mother also brings home a gift from the funeral parlour: “a dead praying mantis” (50). This is the start of Sylvie’s collection of dead insects. Another reference to death is Merry Mary’s child who “turned blue and died” (55).

Another grotesque feature is the idea that Sylvie will be forever “haunted by the ghost of her twin sister. Her spirit is downcast, which suggests that she does not rejoice over her illusory coherent identity but mourns over the loss of Sue as the living, inescapable otherness within herself” (Staels 131). She is worried that “[h]er little legs (...) know” (Gowdy 68) that they will be amputated.

In addition, Sylvie has, next to her “excellent memory” (Gowdy 51), memory spells, which are a sort of flashbacks that make her hear her mother’s voice and make her relive childhood memories. This characteristic can be considered unique and magical, but it is being described as if it is nothing special, but just one of Sylvie’s abilities.

This story contains aspects that are close to magical realism, as the mix between realism and magical happenings can certainly be traced. However, this story is more closely related to the grotesque as a literary genre. Gowdy elaborates both on the physical aberrations of Sylvie’s body and hints at the psychological processes that will follow Sue’s amputation.
### The female body

Even though this story is filled with abnormalities and extraordinarities, the way Sylvie’s body is described is very realistic, detailed and neutral/objective. Throughout the story, there are multiple examples of her sexualized body being associated with Kristeva’s abject:

> One day the boy who chain-smoked stuck his finger up between both pairs of her legs, her little ones and then her own, and she had to race home to wash out the blood that dripped onto her underpants (Gowdy 49)

> both bowels function normally, both menstrual cycles are regular and not necessarily simultaneous, and that although both vaginas have been penetrated, she is, strictly speaking, still a virgin (62)

In addition, there are many references to excess sexuality, like “[h]er little legs kick and fret (...) between her little legs the urge for him is almost past bearing” (68). Moreover, the scene in which Sylvie has intense sex with John seems to be described rather directly:

> When he began to ejaculate, he dug his hands under her hips and lifted her, crushing her little groin into his and bringing on her first orgasm. The waves of the orgasm rolled up his lightning-rod penis into her own vagina and along to her own clitoris, where she had another, more luxurious orgasm (66)

Russo states that “[i]n the case of the mutant woman (...) the grotesque detail is identified with the female genitalia” (114). Indeed, Sylvie’s body becomes associated with sexual pleasure. As Staels states, this double orgasm is a “kind of sexual excess typical of the folk grotesque” (130). When John discovers she has two orgasms, he says “‘I had no idea,’” he said (...) “Of course,” he said, as if hitting upon some comfort, “this presents a whole new angle” (Gowdy 66). At this point, it seems as if this might lead John to refrain from the operation for a moment. The surgeon who examined Sylvie pointed out that she and Sue were still virgins, which seemed to be an important issue for the operation. As a virgin, she has not had any sexual encounters and can still be considered “innocent”. This shows how Sylvie’s body is perceived as an object to experiment on. John, however, was not supposed to have sex with Sylvie and Sue and decides to conceal the information about the double orgasm for the upcoming operation: “We can pretend it never happened, you know. You see, technically speaking, you have not had intercourse. By you I mean you the autosite, the host body.” “Nothing has changed,” she said, but it was a question. “No, no,” he said. “Not as far as you’re concerned” (67). This orgasm, however, is the ultimate sign of femininity and life, which indeed “presents a whole new angle” (66), as the operation might now be perceived as an even more cruel and grotesque act.
5.3 “Ninety-three Million Miles Away”

The fourth story of *We So Seldom Look On Love* is called “Ninety-three million miles away”. The story is written in the third person narrative, but focalized from the protagonist’s point of view. This time, the aberration is less physical than in previous stories. Ali is a young woman who has married Claude, a cosmetic surgeon. She feels unsatisfied in her life and is looking for a hobby. She has tried music and reading, but ends up drawing. When she decides to draw herself, she ends up drawing herself naked. Before she realizes it, she is masturbating in front of her window for a man who lives across the street. She repeatedly exposes herself to this man, as him looking at her is what turns her on. A couple of days later, she finds out that he is a surgeon. Ali buys him a pair of binoculars so he can see her better. She dreams of him operating on her and finally goes visiting him in the hospital, where he works. There she learns that he is moving away to another neighborhood.

The analysis of this short story focuses on the transgressing moments of liminality that draw the reader in and make him/her realize Ali’s uncontrollable behavior is the one thing she is missing in her life. The need of confirmation that she found in the Andrew’s eyes disappears in their confrontation and makes her realize her distorted behavior. However, it will not extinguish the desire she just discovered.

**The norm**

Gowdy, in this story, tackles a woman who discovers her love for exhibitionism. Podolsky defines exhibitionism as follows:

> the exposure by an individual of his genital organs or other parts of his body, publicly, willfully and indecently. Indecent exposure is the legal term for exhibitionism. The exhibitionist is an individual who obtains sexual satisfaction by exposing his genitals. The exhibitionist is most often a man, and the indecent exposure consists of showing his sexual organs to woman, frequently to children and mostly to little girls, rarely to little boys. The exposure of the genitals is usually accompanied by suggestive gestures, frequently with self-gratification (343)

This definition states that an exhibitionist “is most often a man”, which seems to be confirmed by the Encyclopaedia Britannica that

> Exhibitionism is the most common form of sexual deviation to come into conflict with the law in Western society. Nearly all of those arrested for exhibitionism are men; the disorder, if it exists at all in women, is seldom
evident. Some experts suggest that female exhibitionism is not uncommon, but is not identified as deviant behaviour because there are socially acceptable ways for women to display their bodies (np).

However, Ali exposing her body and more specifically her genitals “is regarded as deviant behaviour [as] it takes place outside the context of intimate sexual relations” (“exhibitionism” np).

According to Podolsky, “the exhibitionist wants to impress the female with masculinity about which he is not quite sure himself” (344). When reversed, this can be applied to Ali’s case. She is lacking confirmation of her femininity by her husband, the cosmetic surgeon, and is extremely doubting herself and her body. Her wish is to look like any other woman, to look “normal”:

Did other people find her looks ambiguous? (Gowdy 98)

made it sound as if she should understand that his taste in women was unconventional (98)

I’m serious. You don’t think I’m kind of . . . normal? You know, plain? (Gowdy 104)

Don’t think of me as your wife. Just a woman. (...) Am I beautiful or not? (104)

She obviously wants to be conventionally beautiful and wants her husband to look at her like one of his patients. In the beginning, she “questioned Claude about the ethics of cosmetic surgery” (95), but she has learned to look at it differently.

There is something that she is lacking in her life. On the one hand, it seems as if she does not want the “normal” boring life that everyone in her environment is living: “She grew slightly paranoid that Claude wanted her to settle down and have a baby” (Gowdy 96). She does not want to conform to expectations, but on the other hand, she is hesitant of crossing a line. This feeling of internal conflict is what Ali passes on to the reader.

At first, she tries to normalize her behavior: “She was a bit of an exhibitionist. Most women were, she bet. It was instinctive, a side effect of being the receptor in the sex act” (Gowdy 102), but the moment she realizes she is an exhibitionist, “[s]he let out an amazed, almost exultant laugh, but instantly fell into a darker amazement as it dawned on her that she really was, she really was an exhibitionist. And what’s more, she had been one for years, or at least she had been working up to being one for years” (101). In addition, Ali discovers that she has unconsciously made decisions in her past that fit the definition of an exhibitionist, like not wearing any underpants. She does realize that her behavior is deviant: “Sex addicts must feel like this, she thought. Rapists, child molesters” (101).

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, exhibitionism follows a “severe mental trauma or personal loss” and chronic exhibitionists are “likely to have a serious personality
disorder” (np). One could interpret her insecurities and feeling of uselessness as a loss, the feeling that she has lost herself in her marriage and her daily life.

Normally, an exhibitionist gets pleasure from watching the reaction “of disgust or fear on the part of his victim” (“exhibitionism” np). This however, is different in Ali’s case. She does enjoy the idea of being watched, but the person who is watching her, a man called Andrew, does not at all seem disgusted by what she is doing. This fits the Encyclopaedia Britannica’s definition of voyeurism:

human sexual behaviour involving achievement of sexual arousal through viewing the sexual activities of others or through watching others disrobe. To some extent voyeurism is widespread; various types of sexual display are a normal part of sexual attraction and mating behaviour in most animals, including humans, but voyeurism is considered a deviant behaviour when observation ceases to be merely one factor in sexual attraction and becomes the sole or primary source of gratification. The risk of being caught is an additional element in the excitement of the voyeur (np)

Even though the reader is not provided with the thoughts of the man who is watching, the reader is provided with enough information to imply that he is sexually aroused by Ali masturbating. However, Andrew does not fit this definition of a voyeur completely. First of all, Ali invites him to look at her and even makes sure that she is positioned in order for him to have a good look at her. In addition, for Andrew, there is no danger at all of being caught. He does not have to do it secretly, it is only Ali who takes a risk, as she might get caught by her husband coming home.

Andrew stands “motionless” (Gowdy 106) in front of his window, the only movement he makes, is “to close the drapes” (107). Ali is construing an image of that man in her head. It feels to her “as if she were looking at herself through his eyes. From his perspective she was able to see her physical self very clearly” (100). She decides in her mind what he wants her to do: “She knew that he wanted her to slip her hand down her sweat pants” (103). The act of looking is downplayed by the idea of being looked at. However, Gowdy embeds Ali’s fantasies in Ali’s thoughts of the man’s act of looking. Ali buys him a pair of binoculars because “[s]he was so devoted to his appreciation that her pleasure seemed like a siphoning of his, an early, childish indulgence that she would never return to” (110).

Again, Gowdy refers to medical discourse. Both Ali’s husband, Claude, and the man who watches her, Andrew, are surgeons. Keeping this in mind, Andrew might represent Ali’s husband Claude. All she wants is to look good and be considered beautiful through her husband’s eyes, the man she initially married primarily because he is rich. She wants her husband to love her and she wants him to look or stare at her, just like the man across the street does. The idea that both men are surgeons fits her need to prove herself to normative medical practices, she wants a certain confirmation from the norm, by someone who executes normative practices. Therefore, her exhibitionist practices will not stop until she gets this confirmation she needs with someone who truly loves her.
The grotesque and magical realism

In this story again, Gowdy weaves different references to the grotesque and magical realism. Death, again, seems to be a recurring theme. Not only does the man across the street not react and does he remain “dead-still” (Gowdy 107). The grotesque and its darkness is also present in her belief in a “Ouija board” (99) and in the references to her “looking at herself in the mirror” (104). Not only does Gowdy draw on Bakhtin’s carnivalesque grotesque (cf. intra), the uncanny or “other within the self”-feeling is present throughout the story as well. Ali’s psychic or subconscious processes (cf. Freud) find their manifestation in her drawing. She is drawing this self-portrait of her naked self while she is constantly thinking about the man across the street. This rather grotesque drawing has “breasts like Picasso eyes” (105), “fish-like eyes, a hooked nose [and] a mouth full of teeth” (109). She is actually pretty satisfied as the painting turned out very well. However, when Claude mentioned that “it was still very much a self-portrait”, Ali felt insulted, “given the woman’s obvious primitivism and her flat, distant eyes” (111). Ali herself feels like a picture when posing in the chair in front of the window. She feels like Andrew is dissecting her with his eyes, looking “the way that eyes in certain portraits seem to follow you around a room” (107), as if he is a part of a portrait as well, just like she is. It is as they meet each other in art, in another dimension, but not in real life. However, the drawing of herself on the canvas looks like a dead image. She imagines that the way she looks at the painting, is the way she is perceived by Claude. This image can only be brought alive when she gets a real confirmation of her femininity. As already stated, she does not get from her husband, but only from Andrew. However, the confrontation with Andrew at the end of the story reveals why her drawing looks like a dead image (cf. below). She will only be able to draw an image that is alive when she finds someone who truly appreciates her.

The portrait and the act of looking renders the story more mysterious as well. Even though Ali has the uncanny feeling that she knows Andrew, “[i]n profile he was a stranger” (Gowdy 116). Gowdy plays with these images of light and reflection throughout the story. The moment Ali is in trance, Gowdy uses many adjectives referring to light and the sun, for instance: “Because he was standing with his back to the window, he was outlined in light. It made him seem unreal, like a film image superimposed against a screen” (115). This gives an extra dimension to these moments of disruption and makes them more extraordinary to the reader. However, the overall atmosphere of the story is contradictory comical and light, as Gowdy imbeds humor in Ali’s constant hesitation.

The female body

As Ali does not feel recognized as a woman by her husband, one can interpret her exhibitionism as an act in order to feel like a woman. This brings us to Butler’s theory of
“performativity” (xxiv), which states that “gender [is] an act” (178). Ali has the need to expose her body in order to feel more feminine and to “act out” her gender. When she is performing in front of her window, she embodies the person she wants to be and the way she wants to be seen. This excessive femininity is what makes her feel like a woman.

After this momentary exposing of her body, everything goes back to normal. One can consider the moments of exhibition moments of liminality. Those flashes of disruption consist of – according to Turner (cf. supra) – three phases: separation, liminality and reincorporation. The moment when Ali has a feeling that is taking over her, she “involuntarily” (Gowdy 99) separates from ordinary social reality and finds herself in an in-between moment: “She had the tranced sensation of being at the edge of a cliff” (99). When this moment of disruption is over, she goes back to the habitual structure of normal life. The moment she realizes she is back to reality (reincorporation, back into her body), she is overwhelmed by the rush and by what she did: “She was astonished. She couldn’t believe herself. She couldn’t believe him” (107). These moments of anti-structure draw the reader in and make him/her feel the trance Ali’s in. Although Gowdy describes these outrageous moments in a rather down-to-earth manner, the reader still has the feeling that something extraordinary is happening at the moment when Ali is transgressing limitation imposed on her.

Another moment of liminality is when Ali visits Andrew at the clinic. This too is a transgression of a border. She goes to the clinic in a moment of derangement. This confrontation, however, brings her back to reality. This end of the story can be interpreted as a confrontation with reality and norms installed by society. This confrontation with Andrew at the end of the story can be interpreted as a confrontation with reality and norms installed by society. This moment of looking up the man who is watching her is a moment in which Ali realizes that Andrew is not the man she imagined him to be. She did not masturbate in front of the window for his pleasure, but for her own. It is her way of confirming herself that she is a beautiful woman. When she is rejected by Andrew – who might impersonate her husband -, she simultaneously realizes that her husband will never be able to appreciate her the way she wants to.

Furthermore, these moments of liminality in which she expresses her femininity, are triggered by her drawing her self-portrait. The act of drawing might be associated with Irigaray’s “écriture féminine”, which is about “writing femininity or the female body”, or in this case “drawing” it. According to Moira Gatens, drawing on Irigaray and Cixous, women are able to reaffirm their position in a masculine world by engaging with their outsider position as women. It involves “challenging the masculine monopoly on the construction of femininity, the female body and woman” (232) and the way woman’s body is constructed in culture. “Écriture féminine”, which is in itself transgressive, wants to show what is repressed, which is the embodiment of the real female body and sexuality. This is what Ali does as well. By means of her drawing, she creates her own world in which her femininity is accepted and appreciated, a world that currently does not exist. In other words, a world – in art – in which she is connected with Andrew who gives her the confirmation she needs.
Exposing

When Ali discovers her transgressive sexual behavior, she does recognize certain elements of her impulsive behavior from her past. She feels like the need of exposing herself has always been in her:

what about when she was twelve and became so obsessed with the idea of urinating on people’s lawns that one night she crept out of the house after everyone was asleep and did it? Peed on the lawn of the townhouses next door, right under a streetlight, in fact (Gowdy 101)

In this example, she exposes her body, allegedly secretly, but at the same time she wants people to see her, as she does it “right under a streetlight”. The idea of doing it secretly adds to the experience of doing something that she is not allowed to. The connection between visibility and transgressing boundaries is what makes Ali alive. The experience of masturbating in front of a peeping man, however, is something “[s]he had never experienced” (106) before.

Ali considers her exhibitionism as a temporary moment of need of attention and she clearly distinguishes between love (for her husband) and her association with exhibitionism: “She circled her palms until her nipples hardened. She imagined a man’s hands . . . not Claude’s – a man’s hands not attached to any particular man” (Gowdy 98). This separation from love is, at the same time, not about pure lust. Ali states that “her episodes with Andrew seemed to have nothing at all to do with lust. They were completely display, wholehearted surrender to what felt like the most inaugural and genuine of all desires, which was not sex but which happened to be expressed through a sexual act” (Gowdy 111). Exhibitionism must thus – in a sense – be separated from sexuality. According to Podolsky “[t]he exhibitionist is not looking for bodily pleasure or personal gain. He is driven to the act by powerful unconscious drives. There is no necessity to reach a sexual climax” (344). Indeed, for Ali as well, the pleasure lies in the thought of being looked at. Even though she does experience a climax, this is not what she is looking for. This is just a way of forcing the man across the street to look at her.

She is purely looking for confirmation, not really from Andrew, but rather from her husband. At the same time, she subconsciously knows already that her husband will not be able to give her that confirmation, as he does not cross her mind when masturbating in front of the window. Ali needs a constant conformation of the viewer:

She felt that he was still watching, but she yearned for proof (Gowdy 100)

At that instant she would have paid money for some sign that he was watching (103)

She was angry with the man for not being as keen as she was (108)

In addition, Gowdy’s exhaustively describes Ali’s body when she masturbates:
She began to rotate her hips. With the fingers of both hands she spread her labia (…). She kept her eyes on the man. Moving her left hand up to her breasts, she began to rub and squeeze and to circle her fingers on the nipples. The middle finger of her right hand slipped into her vagina, as the palm massaged the clitoris (…) She was coming. Her body jolted. Her legs shook (106).

This intense moment has recourse to Bakhtin’s carnivalesque explanation of the grotesque. This almost exaggerated scene also produces a comic effect. At these moments, Ali perceives herself differently than she thinks she is perceived by her husband: “his eyes seemed to enter her head like a drug, and she felt herself aligned with his perspective. She saw herself – surprisingly slender, composed but apprehensive – through the glass” (106). As becomes clear, Ali takes on an active as well as a passive role. At the end of the story, she takes on an even more passive role when she imagines Andrew to be operating on her and she dreams about how he cuts her open and him “drawing a tendon out and dropping it into a petri dish” (112). She feels aroused by this and she “worried that she would come and that her trembling and spasms would cause him to accidentally stab her. She woke up coming” (112). This again shows how she enjoys the idea of being exposed and to be looked at.

5.4 “We So Seldom Look On Love”

Necophilia, how far can one go?

The title story is one of the most grotesque stories of the collection, as it displays a female protagonist that is obsessed with male corpses. The reader is not provided with the name of the protagonist, as the story is written in the first person.

The protagonist grows up in “a nice, normal happy family” (Gowdy 171). During her childhood, she appears to show a fascination for dead animals. She has “an animal cemetery” (171), dances around to honor the animals and even holds a ritual “Anointment” (172). Her friend Carol, who later becomes her sister-in-law, is the first one to disapprove of her behavior. When the protagonist cuts off all possible links with her friends, she establishes her own world in which she define herself as a necrophile. She conforms her life to this ‘habit’ by “perform[ing] autopsies” (175) and going to the mortuary every day to have sex with corpses. Later on in her life, she identifies herself as “straight” and starts a relationship with a medical student named Matt. He is fascinated by her behavior and tries to live up to her fantasies as much as possible. Nonetheless, she keeps craving for human corpses and cannot replace the thrill she gets from the surrender to her “obsession” (181). Therefore, he decides to kill himself and gives her his body, as this is the only way she will love him back. At the end of the story, it is hinted at that she is the one to push him from the ladder so he would choke. This story is said to “blur (…) gender boundaries of the multivalent self” (Edwards 161).

This analysis will reveal how the protagonist’s behavior relates to the norm and how she embodies the definition of a necrophile. In addition, it will become clear how the
grotesque and magical realism add to the atmosphere of the story and the description of the female body. The protagonist’s deviating and distorted sexuality will appear to evoke repulsion in the reader, but will at the same time create a kind of understanding that Gowdy stimulates by using humor and irony.

The norm

In Cavallaro’s *The Gothic Vision*, it is stated that

> children are associated with innocence, simplicity and lack of worldly experience (...) [but] precisely because children are not yet fully enculturated, they are frequently perceived as a threat to the fabric of adult society (...) The latent sense of menace associated with childhood as a realm of undifferentiation is reinforced by the Freudian notion that children’s sexuality is polymorphously perverse and hence likely to transgress the dominant sexual mores (135)

Indeed, in this story, it becomes clear that children might transgress the sexual boundaries set by adults. Lynne Segal even adds –based on Freud – that “human sexuality in adulthood is built out of its foundations in the autoeroticism and polymorphous perversities of childhood” (105). The reader is provided with some information of the protagonist’s childhood. When she is thirteen years old, she already displays unusual behavior, as during the day she seeks dead animals and by midnight, she’d “go out and dig up the grave and conduct a proper burial” (Gowdy 173). She tries to include her friend Carol in this, who joins her at first, but quickly starts to question her friend’s actions. Carol tells her mother that her friend did “some disgusting witchcraft dance” (174) and later, when she becomes her sister-in-law, she tells her “you’re sick! You should be put away” (171). This experimental phase in the protagonist’s childhood is, except for Carol, not questioned by the people in her environment, probably because they are not aware of it. As a reader, we are not provided with more information. Consequently, at that stage, the protagonist does not reflect on her behavior and does not care about Carol’s reproaches. She thinks her behavior is normal and assumes that other people do it too. She even states that “Carol has always been jealous of [her]” (173).

Even though she grew up in a “normal” (Gowdy 170) family, the protagonist starts realizing that she is different from everybody else and when she turns thirteen, she “was cutting any lines that still drifted out toward normal eroticism. Bosom friends, crushes, pyjama-party intimacy, [she] was cutting all those lines off” (175). Moreover, the protagonist starts to display traits that are in accordance with the definition of necrophilia:

> Necrophilia literally means love of the dead and is generally defined as sexual relations with corpses (...) The disorder is considered relatively rare; however, its true prevalence is unknown and is perhaps unknowable. There appears to
be an increased tendency of necrophiliacs obtaining jobs in morgues or funeral parlors in order to have solitary access to dead bodies, and, in rare cases, such offenders have disinterred corpses (Stein et al.)

As already mentions, she identifies herself as a necrophile when she is sixteen years old, but she does not equalize it with something that is morally wrong. However she does realize that she displays abnormal behavior, but does not consider herself as being weird:

It was a dark and forbidden thing, yes, but so was sex. I really had no idea that I was jumping across a vast behavioural gulf. In fact, I couldn’t see that I was doing anything wrong. I still can’t (Gowdy 173)

I had discovered myself to be irredeemably abnormal. I could either slit my throat or surrender – wholeheartedly now – to my obsession (181)

[Mr. Wallis:] “Now there was a weird man. He would take a trocar, which is the big needle you use to draw out a cadaver’s fluids, and he would push it up the penises of dead man to make them look semi-erect, and then he’d sodomize them (176)

As for the necrophilia, it wasn’t a crime, not fifteen years ago. So even though I was caught in the act (...) there was nothing the police could charge me with (184)

It is as if she sets herself out of the definition of necrophilia, as she explains that “[n]ecrophiles aren’t supposed to be blond and pretty, let alone female” (177). She was, in contrast with for example Carol (who is “fat and has a wandering eye” (173)), even asked to participate in a beauty pageant and she looked – according to Matt - like Doris Day. She finds herself in between the idea of being a necrophile and just being herself, as she distinguishes herself from the typical necrophile. It is as if she creates a place for herself in an unaccepting world, in which she does accept herself the way she is. However, there is still a sense of wanting to conform to the norm, but solely in order to please her: “I wish I could have loved him with more than sisterly love” (177). Matt’s reaction when he discovers that she is a necrophile is rather unusual and remarkable. He seems genuinely fascinated by her acts and keeps asking her questions. Again, Gowdy subtly refers to the medical science world, as Matt is a medical student. It quickly hits the protagonist that she is unable to fall in love with him, as she yearns for dead bodies. Here as well, one can consider these moments of liminality (cf. Turner) as a way to escape normative reality. The unstoppable and extreme feelings towards cadavers even drive her to the irrevocable point of killing Matt: “I was gripping the ladder, and then it was by the wall, tipped over. I have no memory of transition between these two events” (186). Stein et al. elucidate that “[i]n some instances, necrophiles—who have a strong desire to engage in the act—have even killed in order to get a corpse” (np). This, again, makes her conform to the “normal” necrophile. At the end of the story, she has completely drawn him
into her world and does not acknowledge her deeds. Killing Matt could be considered a harsh confrontation with reality, yet it does not stop her, but rather shows how addictive and uncontrollable her behavior is.

Strikingly, the protagonist does not want to look the corpses in the eye, which is a reference to the title of the story and the whole collection. This can also be linked to the other stories of the collection, for instance “Body and Soul”, in which Terry regaining her eye-sight appears to be alienating and cutting her off from a world in which she used to be safe, or “Ninety-three Million Miles Away”, in which the act of looking is central.

**The grotesque and magical realism**

Gowdy constantly confirms the mysterious atmosphere in this story by drawing on the magical realist idea of a special kind of energy. Already in the opening scene, the reader is confronted with the supernatural feeling of the energy that finds itself between life and death: “When you die, and your earthly self begins turning into your disintegrated self, you radiate an intense current of energy (...) really magical and explosive (...) energy emission” (Gowdy 170). This energy is seducing the protagonist to conduct her deviant sexual behavior, as she states she “must have been aroused by the energy” (171). The expected cliché duality of life and death is interrupted by this magical and spiritual element. The protagonist can only find this addictive and illuminating energy in dead corpses:

> I felt as if I were being blasted by white light. Almost blinded (181)

> his cadaver blasted the energy of a star (184)

Gowdy, just as in “Ninety-three Million Miles Away”, portrays this behavior as irresistible.

> [Her] attraction to cadavers isn’t driven by fear, it’s driven by excitement (175)

> tremors were running up and down my legs (180)

> necrophilia wasn’t something you forced yourself to do. You longed to do it, you needed to do it. You were born to do it (183)

Everything connected to death revives the protagonist. As a child, she did not only have an “animal cemetery” (171) in the woods, she also took the dead animal into her “bedroom and hid it until midnight” (171), until the moment she could held a burial ceremony for it. During that ceremony, she chanted and danced. A ritual that is central during these ceremonies is what she calls “the Anointment. I can’t describe how it felt. The high, high rapture. The electricity that shot through me” (172). The magical atmosphere that surrounds this ritual brings the reader to whole different and higher world, one that is spiritually and religiously
linked to the dead. In addition, Gowdy describes the way the protagonist picked out Carol ("and I chose her" (173)) as if her friend is the chosen one.

Another remarkable act, which has recourse to the typical terrifying grotesque, is the protagonist’s killing of the foetuses of chipmunks that were still alive. She just “flushed them down the toilet” (Gowdy 173) without trying to save them. The next time she deliberately kills someone is when she pushes the ladder on which Matt stands, ready to be killed. This can be considered the ultimate act of love. The days before his death, he stares at himself in the mirror, while asking himself uncannily whether this is his face or not: “Watching as his face separated into its infinitesimal particles and reassembled into a strange new face” (185). Matt does not recognize himself anymore, as he is completely changed by the protagonist. He seems not to be able to cope with the discovery of the other within himself.

Even though the protagonist claims that “[t]hrough [her] Matt’s love poured into the cadavers at the funeral home, and through [her] the cadavers filled Matt with explosive energy” (Gowdy 181), he cannot cope with the idea that she will never really love him. “The night before he died, he had a mask on. A Dracula mask, but he wasn’t joking” (185); he had already tried everything to make her love him, “[h]e had begun to wear incredibly weird outfits. Velvet capes, pantaloons, high-heeled red boots” (187), but this had not been enough. These acts tell that he genuinely wants to enter her world. However, they are very cliché and can almost be conceived as a way of making fun of her.

Another way of implementing humor is by the use of metaphors. For instance the comparison of making love to a corpse is “like diving into a lake”, while “[b]eing with Matt was like lying on the beach of the lake” (Gowdy 180). Furthermore, the spiritual atmosphere is reinforced by the use of strong metaphors like “that obsession began to storm through me, as if I were a tunnel” (181). Other comical, and even ironic, elements are the protagonist’s mother telling her not to play with Carol anymore, as “[t]here’s a screw loose in there somewhere” (174), while her daughter is the one who is displaying deviant behavior. These examples, which might be considered Gowdy’s reference to “the comic grotesque” described by Thomson (cf. supra), undermine the story’s darkness, but also create a certain understanding with the reader.

In addition, Gowdy incorporates many references to Kristeva’s abject, more specifically to blood, throughout the story. The protagonist wants to “perform autopsies” (Gowdy 175), “slice open the flesh” (170) and is turned on by blood, a lubricant which is “colourful. Stimulating. It’s the ultimate bodily fluid” (178). Not only the idea of looking at blood is important to her, she wants it to move, as if it is the only element in the dead body that is still alive:

[Matt] knew that if you apply pressure to the chest of certain fresh corpses, they purge blood out of their mouths (177)

By now he might be drooling blood. A corpse’s blood is thick, cool and sweet (181)
She even needs to taste the blood: “I started sticking my tongue into the incision” (176) and when he dies “[t]here was a loud crack, and gushing water (...)” “I kissed the blood at the corner of his mouth” (186). The mouth in itself is, according to Bakhtin, another grotesque and “monstrous feature” (Cavallaro 193) because it is associated to “female eroticism on the basis of woman’s objectification as a predatory monster” (194). This blood, that has become something erotic, is the only remaining source of life in the body of the cadavers, as it still moving. It is as if she needs this last remainder of life to feel alive herself. Gowdy mixes these different grotesque and magical realist elements. In this story, she mainly relies on conventions of the demonic and monstrously disturbing grotesque.

The female body

The stereotypical image of a male necrophile is inverted. Here it is a “straight” woman who makes love to male corpses. She points out that “By the time I was sixteen I wanted human corpses. Men. (That way I’m straight.)” (Gowdy 176). It is striking that she mentions it this way, as this is not what the reader expects. She has identified herself as a necrophile, which already implies a specific pre-conceived image that is not compatible with the accepted possible sexual orientations.

Another cliché stereotype that Gowdy challenges is the dichotomous idea of the active man and the passive woman. This order is questioned and reversed, as the protagonists needs passive male corpses to have sex with. Even though these male corpses are objectified, as they are dead, she does not perceive them like this: “They’re all different. Each corpse contains his own extremes. Each corpse is only as wise and as innocent as the living person could have been” (Gowdy 182). She confirms that “[w]ith Matt, when we made love, I was the receiving end, I was the cadaver. When I left him and went to the funeral home, I was the lover” (181). Her living active female body, as being the beautiful blonde Doris Day lookalike, contrasts with the male dead bodies. This connection between active femininity and life questions the stereotypical perception of the dominant male expressing his force by having sex with a passive woman.

However, it is most striking that this protagonist, when having sex with Matt, pretends to be the dead cadaver. In contrast to her actions with corpses, she is the one who now takes on the passive role: “He wanted to wear the [Dracula] mask while I made love to him as if he were a cadaver. No way, I said. The whole point, I reminded him, was that I played the cadaver” (Gowdy 185). This mask – as already mentioned – can be interpreted as a typically grotesque image. According to Russo, it is usually used to hide something dangerous or to take on a particular role. Going into this latter option, Russo refers to Butler’s performativity. However, here it has nothing to do with gender, but with sexual behavior. This Dracula mask refers to Bram Stoker’s blood-sucking vampire. Just like this vampire, she gets a kick out of dead bodies and frequently “suction[s] out [her] own blood until [she] los[es] consciousness” (179). It is as if she wants to experience what it feels like to be dead, to be one of the corpses
that she is having sex with, as “[t]rue obsession depends on the object’s absolute unresponsiveness” (187).

The dancing ritual

When the protagonist was thirteen years old, she and Carol stripped down to [their] underwear, screamed, spun in circles, threw dirt up into the air. Carol has always denied it, but she took off her bra and began whipping trees with it (Gowdy 174)

One of those times, the protagonist notices that her hand “was bloody” (174) and says that “[t]here were streaks of blood all over [her] body. [She] was horrified. [She] thought [she]’d squeezed the chipmunk too hard” (174). Later, she discovered that she was having her period. This extraordinary performance of the girls covered in blood dancing naked in front of dead animals evokes both horror and awe with the reader. She still performs dances in front of the male corpses as well “before [she climbs] on top of them” (172), in which she tries – according to Matt – to “imitate the disintegration process” (172) of the bodies in decay.

Paula-Irene Villa elucidates the importance of embodiment. Drawing on Butler, Villa goes into this idea of performative mimesis. There always is the idea that we live up to a previous act, but can never fully copy or imitate that act, as there is always a sense of variation and we always fail to live up to the “normative” act. Villa emphasizes that “‘doing’ is necessarily more and, therefore, other than the incorporation of theoretically and analytically defined central social categories” (171). This is what the protagonist does as well. She documented herself about necrophilia, she for instance “read that necrophiles are frightened of getting hurt by normal sexual relationships” (175). She created an image of what a necrophile generally does and tries to live up to that idea. For her, the “normative” act of love, the image of making love is to a male corpse and not to a living man. Therefore, Matt will never be able to fully satisfy her needs. However, as she tries to embody being a necrophile, she necessarily fails doing so. As already stated, she considers herself different than any other necrophile, but does acknowledge its definition. To her, each experience with a corpse is different and can never live up to the normative idea of just having sex with a corpse.

5.5 “Flesh of My Flesh”

Of transgenderism and murder

This final and longest story of the collection, “Flesh of My Flesh”, centers a woman named Marion. The story is a third person narrative, filled with flashbacks to Marion’s time with her former boyfriend John Bucci.
“Flesh of My Flesh” begins on Marion’s and Sam’s honeymoon. When Marion wants to have sex with her husband, he reveals to her that he is transgender and is in the middle of his transitioning process. She is shocked and has difficulties coping with the situation. This plot is alternated and finally comes together with Marion’s past. Her mother was murdered when Marion was nineteen years old by a man, Bert Kella, who claims to have had an affair with her mother. Bert Kella had “shot Marion’s mother twice from behind as she stood peeling potatoes at the sink” (Gowdy 190) and committed suicide afterwards. This traumatic event will appear to keep haunting her. Later, she gets to know John Bucci, owner of the Elite Shoe Store. She is happy with him and even marries him. Marion ends up working in Mrs. Hudgson’s pet store. Her father ends up marrying his rich and fat pen friend Grace Inkpen. Marion’s best friend, the rebellious Cory Bates, moves in with her and John and ends up taking a job at Rick’s nightclub where she dances in “pasties and G-strings” (235). Rick, whom she was together with, abused her and had “fantasies of cutting her face so that no other guy would want her” (235). Cory is having an affair with Marion’s husband John and ends up pregnant, and this leads up to Marion divorcing John. At the end of story, Marion comes to terms with Sam’s transition process and gradually learns to come to terms with it.

This analysis will show what role the norm is playing in Marion’s and Sam’s life and how they deal with it. It will become clear how the female bodies in this story relate to the grotesque, how old trauma’s come together with new experiences and how the protagonists try make sense of a world in which new norms are on the verge of being installed.

The norm

It is striking that this story is filled with the typical female grotesque bodies that are described by Russo. Cory can be considered as the “Unruly Woman” (Russo 14), while Grace Inkpen impersonates the role of the “Fat Lady” (Russo 14). Marion is close to the “Hysteric” and Sam can be seen as the opposite of the “Female Impersonator” (14).

Marion is a “theatrically tall and thin” (Gowdy 195) woman who feels excluded from the moment her mother is killed. It is as if the world around her feels like she is will not be able to get over this and they consider her “off the hook” (191), she “didn’t even get an acknowledgement from the university, and none of her teachers tried to talk her into returning to high school and finishing her final year” (191). Nobody treated her as a “normal” person anymore and her father was “doing his best to be both mother and father to her” (215). From that specific moment onwards, it is as if she is considered to be different from anybody else. In her later life, Marion fears the reaction of other people and is concerned of what they might think. When she discovers on her honeymoon that Sam is transgender, she thinks about how she will be able to send wedding gifts back. She does not want anyone to know about this and “has the horrifying thought that people might be suspicious” (213). She tries to convince herself that “everyone would swear it was a man” (212). As she has difficulties to cope with this situation, she appears to be emotionally unstable. Her
dramatically crying and sudden fits of laughter reveal that “she had become hysterical” (189) and often “snapped out of her hysterics” (189). This draws us closer to Russo’s grotesque “Hysteric” (14) woman. Davis adds that hysteria is a “‘typical’ feminine disorder (...) which [is a] form of protest where women are victims” (462). Indeed, one can consider her a victim, as she is the one that has been lied to.

Russo’s “fat lady” (14) finds a translation in the figure of Grace Inkpen, Marion’s father’s new wife. Grace is a very caring person who is creative, bakes, knits and brings Marion’s parental home alive, as she brings for her first visit already, a self-made Christmas tree. Grace wants to marry and follow “the tradition” (Gowdy 227). She seems to take on the job of a perfect housewife and she can be said to fulfill the role of a caring stepmother to Marion, as she can for example easily provide for her. She appears to be everything a good mother needs to be.

A totally different female character in the story is Cory. She is close to Russo’s definition of the unruly woman. Russo points out that unruly women opt for “temporary release from the traditional and stable hierarchy” (58). This description fits Cory very well. Her embodiment of this unruly woman expresses itself in her behavior. She judges other people, shows no tact or respect for others and does not care what other people think of her. In addition, her life is not structured at all. She has sex with different men, has no fixed job or stable environment. Her behavior might partly be due to the lack of a decent mother-figure (cf. intra).

Sam

The character of Sam displays a transgender person. Biologically, he used to be a woman, but his gender identity is male. He thus wants to change his biological sex, as his gender and sex are not aligned.

Sam was planning not to tell anything about this to Marion. He did not want anybody to know and to keep it a complete secret, which worked up till now, as his parents had already died. Just like Marion, he considers it something to be ashamed of, something that is not normal and that should be hidden. He is afraid of people’s reactions and wants to avoid reactions like Marion’s “You just can’t come into the world a woman and decide to be a man. That’s what this all about. You can’t do that” (Gowdy 227).

The normative female body is obviously questioned by Sam, as his goal is to transform it in a male body. Even though, according to Marion, “it won’t be real” (Gowdy 226), there is a sort of recreation of the norm, but now it is the opposite norm. This idea of returning to a certain norm as a transgender is critiqued by the radical feminist Jeffreys. She does not consider transgender as a category next to women and men, namely a “third gender” (58), but points out that transgenders want to conform to existing expectations of men and women. This involves among other things cosmetic surgery and she implies that the transitioning operation can also be considered as a harmful cultural practice. Also Shildrick and Price affirm that “[t]ransgenders are not self-evidently transgressive, insofar as they display a nostalgia for fit” (Shildrick and Price 80).
Judith Halberstam, in the essay “F2M: the making of female masculinity” proposes to “call all elective body alterations (...) cosmetic surgery” (130). Sam considers his final surgery as just creating a body part and compares it to a form of cosmetic surgery as well: “‘What if I lost a leg and got an artificial one?’ he says. ‘Or if I had a glass eye, or, I don’t know, a toupee, or I had a nose job? What about women who have breast implants?’” (Gowdy 226). Drawing on this idea, one could call the “female to male” operation a harmful cultural practice (cf. supra). In Sam’s experience, however, it is a recreation of a complete self. To him, it is as self-evident as people getting a prosthetic leg, something that is indispensable for him.

Indeed, the end scene of the story gives away that – at least for outsiders – the norm will be reinstalled: “If somebody were looking down on them (...) They would seem like two happily married, perfectly normal people” (Gowdy 245). However, this medical procedure or “[t]ranssexual surgery (...) requires that the medically produced body be resituated ontologically. All that was known about this body has now to be relearned; all that was recognizable about this body has to be renamed” (Halberstam 131).

At the end of story, the surgery is not completed yet. It is as if Sam finds himself in an in-between phase in his life. Just as in “Body and Soul” and “Sylvie”, the end is open and situated right before the operation. However, this operation is rather different than in these stories. Here, medical surgery plays a different role, as this operation is not forced upon him. However, it should not be called a choice either. This operation is, to him, a confirmation of how he feels in his mind and is necessary to overcome the alienation from his current body. These operations for transgender people are perceived as rather emancipatory and underline individual agency. It is not really a choice to Sam, it is a part of himself that physically needs to be completed, but that is already there mentally.

The grotesque and magical realism

The grotesque is obviously present in Sam’s bodily transformation and the body’s strangeness. However, Gowdy does not only makes use of Bakhtin’s materiality in relation to the grotesque, but also resorts to Kayser’s and Freud’s uncanny psyche. Marion’s unsettling emotions and references to her trauma add to the overall alienating atmosphere. These many references to death and the murder of Marion’s mother evoke a rather horrifying atmosphere. Marion clearly misses her mother and she tries to take up a mother role for the kitten: “Every three hours Marion feeds it formula with an eye dropper, then she puts it in the bathtub and tries to make it pee” (Gowdy 189). She wants, in a sense, to take over her own mother’s role, as she wants to make sure her father is alright. This becomes clear in this quotation:

the police drew chalk outlines of her mother’s remains on the kitchen floor, and every once in a while Marion was struck by the strangely comforting sensation that those outlines were fitted along her own skin (193)
This uncanny feeling reveals that she is uncannily taking over her mother’s role. Shildrick and Price mention “[t]he image of floating or unruly wombs and their attendant symptom of hysteria” (337). Marion’s above-mentioned hysteria and mother feelings might thus stem from the trauma of losing her mother. Also, Cory is missing a decent mother figure as her parents were constantly fighting or sleeping. She considers herself adopted, because she does not want to be associated with her parents. She gave up her own baby for adoption in the past, and now wants to squeeze a puppy to death and “the minute it starts whimpering, [her] breast milk starts dripping” (Gowdy 194). Moreover, when she discovers she is pregnant with John, she is determined to keep the baby. Her pregnant body might also be considered grotesque, as “[t]he fascination with the maternal body (…), the fear of and repulsion from it (…) constitutes it (…) as a privileged site of liminality and defilement” (Russo 64). Both women lack a mother figure and seem to cover for that themselves.

The “grisly stories” (Gowdy 216) told by Mrs. Hodgson about “[c]ats put in ovens, dryers and dishwashers. Hamsters sucked up vacuums. A dog tied to the back of a car and forced to run to death” (210) add to the atmosphere surrounding the unusual death of her mother. Gowdy, however, mixes these references to death with comical elements, like the coincidence of her mother having “a hole in her back (...) [r]ight where the second bullet went in” (192) and the rumors surrounding this murder. In addition, Gowdy’s hidden symbolism adds to Marion’s process of trying to make sense of what is happening in her life. For instance Cory’s “slender legs that made Marion think of the obscenely long stamens of tropical flowers” (234) represent Cory’s fertile body, as she will end up pregnant.

**The female body**

Queer corporeality in general, just like deviant sexuality and gender identity, has been linked to the grotesque. Ellis Hanson, in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, explains, in contrast to Shildrick’s “nostalgia for fit” (80) that it shows “the radical deconstruction of sexual rhetoric as a form of resistance to sexual normalization” (Hanson 175). This is possible because “[s]ex identity, as defined by the body, is not fixed, but optional – it can be (re)constructed by genetics, information technology or medicine” (Edwards 160). Sam has already undergone a mastectomy two years ago, has been taking hormones (has an Adam’s apple for instance) for four years and wears a fake penis. Edwards states that “[s]uch a vision of corporeality transforms the body into a hybrid landscape that effaces the individual subject by allowing the surface of the body to metamorphose into the Other” (160). However, as already mentioned, one can interpret it in a different way as well, namely that the normative male body is restored. Jeffreys, for instance, does not consider the results of this process as “hybrid” body, as she questions whether a transgender person “really challenge[s] gender stereotypes” (58) by reinstalling the norm of masculinity.

**The image of a penis**
The penis, as an ultimate male characteristic, is a recurring image throughout the story:

She avoids looking at his crotch. The rest of his body she catches herself looking at for slip-ups, as if the real Sam is somewhere else and this one’s a fake. She looks at him coolly and sometimes with distaste and wonder, saying to herself, “That’s a woman’s shoulder. That’s a woman’s arm.” (Gowdy 220)

the thought of him washing his female genitals crosses her mind, and she has to spit out what’s in her mouth (221)

It’ll be real. They’ll use my own skin (...) “It won’t ejaculate sperm (...) But it’ll erect (226)

Marion focuses on the fakeness of the “dildo” (199) that Sam is wearing. This prosthesis turns Sam, according to Russo, who draws on Haraway, into one of “[t]hese “odd boundary creatures” (...) [that] move “tactically” and ergonomically outward and are capable of extensive reconfiguration, replication, and monstrous metamorphoses” (15).

Findlay points out that “[p]enises can only be compared to dildos in the sense that they take up space” (467) and argues that many (lesbian) feminists do not consider the dildo as representing a penis, as they are “sexual accessories, not substitutes” (469). Here, however, Sam does consider this dildo as a substitute penis, awaiting his “real” penis.

Even though one could argue that medically/technically creating a “real” penis is a part of the reconstruction of the male body, Halberstam claims that “the potential of medical technology to alter bodies makes natural gender and biological sex merely antiquated categories in the history of sexuality, that is, part of the inventedness of sex” (Halberstam 129). He argues that “we are all transsexuals”, having in mind that essentialism is a cultural construction and, by consequence, sex does not exist. “The insistence (...) that the penis alone signifies maleness, corresponds to a tendency within academic discussion of gender to continue to equate masculinity solely with men” (Halberstam 128), which is fundamentally wrong, as gender and sex do not necessarily align and are both culturally constructed. Consequently, neither a penis nor a dildo should be considered a typically male feature.

Stereotypes

Nowadays, “we posit the artificiality of gender and sex with increasing awareness of how and why our bodies have been policed into gender identities” (Halberstam 129). One can argue that this story obviously plays with gender stereotypes. Marion rethinks her life with Sam and is consciously looking for clues that she could have noticed before. Going through this process, she blames herself for not catching any signs. She falls back on stereotypes in order to make sense of it all and wonders why “instead of thinking “Men don’t cry,” she thought she was

3 Judith Butler also points out that in Gender Trouble that sex is, just like gender, culturally constructed.
witnessing a side of his artistic temperament” (Gowdy 204), or why she did not realize that “[t]he hand that knew exactly what to do was a woman’s hand” (206).

Those gender stereotypes are, on the one hand, refuted, as they show that they should not necessarily be attributed to one gender, but on the other hand, they are confirmed by Marion when she states that she should have known it all along. Confronted with this situation, Marion starts questioning herself:

Seeing her breasts in the mirror makes her cry. Everything about her from the neck down seems a waste now, and perverse, as if she’s the one with the wrong body (Gowdy 121)

“The “him” that she used to love isn’t there any more. It was never there, that’s the staggering part. And yet she still loves him. She wonders if she’s subconsciously bisexual. Or maybe it’s true that she loves blindly” (213)

In her mind, everything becomes fluid and she loses track of the normative society she is born and brought up in. She tries to make sense of her own world, the world she now entered, but constantly fails to.

The dream about the bullet and the hole

While Sam is on the verge of his final operation, Marion dreams about the bullet and the hole:

The night before Sam leaves to have his operation, Marion dreams about somebody who starts out being her mother but seems to change into John. Marion is embracing this person, melting with love, when she discovers a hole in the small of his or her back. She sticks her hand in, reaches up and withdraws the heart. It pulses and half-rolls in her palm like a newly hatched bird. It is so exposed! She puts it in her mouth and tries to get it down her throat into her ribcage without scraping its delicate membrane or stopping its beat. It catches on something though, a tooth-like thing in the area of her vocal cords, and tears in half. She lets go of it and it just slips away. She starts to cry. She wakes up crying (Gowdy 242-243)

This dream might be considered a liminal or transgressive moment, as defined by Turner (cf. supra), in which she subconsciously tries to make sense of the world around her. Marion dreams about a person that she loves, her mother, a woman, that turns into John, whom she considers as a typical masculine man, a “real” man. This person, that might represent Sam, however, is losing female gender, but is still lingering between the male and female gender (“his or her”). However, she embraces this person, which would be Sam, and she or he is someone she loves, even though the distinction between a woman or a man has effaced. This same person has, just like her mother, a hole in his or her back. Bert Kella had love interests in Marion’s mother and shot, with a gun, a hole in her back. The murder can be interpreted as
him wanting to penetrate her vagina (hole) with his penis (gun). As her mother already had a hole (vagina), Bert Kella wanted to confirm her femininity by having sex with her.

The hole in Marion’s dream, then, might be understood as Sam’s vagina. The “newly hatched bird” represents Sam’s new penis that is very fragile and “delicate” and that she should be careful. Marion states that it “is so exposed!”, meaning that, as he had kept everything secret, she has never seen it before and that she has the tendency to stare at it. She ends up breaking the penis, as she is the one who cannot cope with the whole process and breaks their love. This also shows how difficult she finds this process and how she gradually loses her voice, her opinion, herself.

After Bert Kella murdered her mother, he committed suicide and “[shot] himself in the mouth” (191). It is not a coincidence that Marion feels like her vocal cords are teared in half. She feels like the love she offered both John and Sam is not appreciated and is never enough as it is constantly put to the test, just like Bert Kella’s love was not enough for her mother.

During the last scene, however, she seems to reconnect with Sam:

he kneels between her legs and parts her labia with his fingers. Then he licks her there. It’s the first time this has been done to her. She assumes it’s preliminary. He keeps it up, though, soft, steady, devoted, cat-like licking until her body begins to loosen. Her joints unhinge. Her vulva breaks free and levitates, ad her skin spreads like dough, a lovely, funny sensation, and then a disturbing one. And then she doesn’t care – she’d die to prolong it (...) Her pelvis jolts and her vagina contracts almost painfully (Gowdy 244)

It is as if, by the end of the story, all Marion’s traumatic experiences come together and she learns to cope with them at the same time. This last scene reveals how she lets everything go and how she learns to accept – and even sexually enjoy - the situation as it is. Marion realizes that her and Sam’s life will never be the same again: just like “Body and Soul”, they are on a threshold, waiting for the completion of normative restoration. Segal mentions that “[t]he human clitoris, physiological site of female orgasm and without reproductive purpose, undermines all attempts to link sexual pleasure to reproductive outcome” (105). Marion’s assumption that “it’s preliminary” might indeed be associated with her belief that sex should be directly linked with a reproductive purpose and biological determination. Oral sex, however, is new to her and introduces her to a whole new world, a world that is different from the one in which she needed to function as a mother because she lost hers, that is different from the one in which gender and sex were pre-established categories.
6. Conclusion

As Claude was always saying, things looked different from different angles and in different lights. What this meant to her was that everything hinged on where you happened to be standing at a given moment, or even on who you imagined you were. It meant that in certain lights, desire sprang up out of nowhere (“Ninety-three Million Miles Away” - Gowdy 117)

The five short stories analyzed above reveal that “[t]he category of the female grotesque is crucial to identity formation for both men and women as a space of risk and abjection” (Russo 12). This master’s paper has taken a look at the female grotesque in Gowdy’s We So Seldom Look On Love and has thus explored how its female characters show grotesque bodies or behavior, how magical realism adds to this and how societal norms interact with this. By referring to Russo, it became clear that the female body is the most obvious site to explore the grotesque.

In “Body and Soul”, Gowdy reveals how an old and rather naïve woman takes care of physically and mentally disabled foster children: a blind girl with a birthmark on her face, an epileptic fat girl and a girl without arms. The story “Sylvie” displays a girl with an extra pair of “normal legs” (48), bowels and a functional reproductive system, while Gowdy’s “Ninety-three Million Miles Away” portrays a female exhibitionist, masturbating in front of a peeping man across the street. The analysis of “We So Seldom Look on Love”, in its turn, focuses on the deviating behavior of a female necrophile who does not realize her limits. Finally, “Flesh of My Flesh” shows a woman, Marion, who just discovered that her husband is a female to male transgender.

In these stories, Gowdy creates a rather intense atmosphere by drawing on some typical grotesque and gothic genre conventions. Gowdy mixes and matches different grotesque elements and fuses aspects of Bakhtin’s bodily materiality with Kayser’s and Freud’s notions of psychic subjectivity. Her rewriting of these different types of the grotesque creates an unique experience for the reader. The monstrous and haunting elements are downplayed by Gowdy’s realism and humor, which makes the stories’ tone immediately lighter. She succeeds in implementing carnivalesque, as well as monstrous, strange and comic aspects in a realist setting, and, by doing so, makes it her own. By depicting the characters as human beings with general feelings and thoughts, she challenges the most common conception of the monstrous and exaggerated grotesque which provokes repulsion and emotional distress. Some recurring features of the grotesque in all five stories are the uncanny and Kristeva’s notion of the abject. “Body and Soul”, “Sylvie” and “Flesh of My Flesh” share many features with Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque, such as the excessive materiality of the body, and terrifying or uncanny bodily deviations, while “Ninety-three Million Miles Away” and “We So Seldom Look on Love” rather explore mental processes and excessive behavior or sexuality.
Gowdy immediately evokes empathy with the reader, as the protagonists all share a certain rationality, rather than creating repulsion. There are certainly elements of magical realism to be traced. The grotesque, however, seems to hold a more prominent place.

The five short stories discussed above, indeed, all sketch protagonists that are challenging the demanding norm of the female body and its sexuality by exposing their grotesque physical or behavioral deviation. It is striking that, in most of the stories, recurring aspects such as the dysfunctional mother-daughter relation, medical discourse and sexuality are central to the composition of the story and add to Gowdy’s conceptions of the norm. However, the question arises whether the characters are really able to stand firm or whether the norm is reinstalled by influences from outside.

First, the norm is imposed on Aunt Bea’s foster children. The harmful cultural practices forced on Terry make her feel cut off from this unknown and unsafe world while her trusted world is taken away. Also for Julie, Aunt Bea’s other foster child, a norm is reinstalled, as she must return to a specialized center for mentally disabled children. Sylvie, then, is talked into getting rid of Sue, her extra pair of legs, that used to be the basis on which she built her life. Furthermore, Ali gets confronted with her risky exposing behavior when she visits the man who is peeping at her from across the street. At that moment, she realizes that her acts are mostly unusual, but that the desire to do it will never go away. The female necrophile, then, has a lot to answer for. She is accountable for her lover’s death, but never quits her habit of making love to corpses. Finally, Sam’s body might be considered as conforming to the idea of the male norm. Both Marion and Sam need to create a new identity – by drawing on past experiences - that will never be the same.

In each of these stories, the protagonists are/were stuck in a situation that is/was unwillingly forced upon them by internal or external factors. A recurring pattern is striking: the norm is challenged by characters that are born with physical deviations, while others develop deviant behavior. When a physical norm is (almost) reinstalled or when the protagonists conform physically to society’s stands – by harmful cultural practices or medical science and technology- they feel cut off from their self-created and safe world that they have known all along and they end up feeling lost and not yet welcomed in a new unsafe and – to them – dysfunctional world. This is the case with Terry, Sylvie and Marion. For Julie, Ali and the female necrophile (and also – in a way- in the case of Sam), on the other hand, this is different, as they display deviating behavior rather than bodily deviation. Their behavior might be linked to Turner’s theory of liminality and moments of transgression. Yet, the characters encounter a confrontation with reality and norms, during which they live through this sense of not belonging, or are even punished for it by society’s norms. However, they (will) always end up falling back into their old patterns. Just like physical deviance, normative behavior will never be able to fill the void that is left behind, as the desire will never go away.

By drawing on the grotesque and magical realism, Gowdy certainly surpasses the cliché image of women and stereotypes of femininity or the female body. Gowdy humorously, and in a detailed way, explores what her bodily, socially and sexually transgressive characters feel, see and think. In this short story collection, female deviation does not evoke fear or repulsion,
but rather forces the reader to intensely sympathize with the protagonists. No female protagonist in this collection desires to conform to imposed and harmful norms, which adds to the empathy and compassion of the reader. The character’s natural desires and instincts endear the reader and makes him/her feel what they are feeling. Gowdy makes the reader question what the norm exactly implies, and makes him/her wonder why there is a norm anyway. As quoted at the beginning of this conclusion, Gowdy’s *We So Seldom Look On Love* reveals that the norm seems to be challenged, is deviated from and gets more or less restored, depending on the type of deviation as well as on which side of the norm one stands and on the angle one is looking from.
Works cited


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