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STUNTED REBEL, CHAOTIC DRUM: GROTESQUE ARREST AND CARNIVALESQUE SUBVERSION OF THE REICH IN *THE TIN DRUM*

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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that Gross-Günter's The Tin Drum (1959) utilizes grotesque embodiment and carnivalesque performance as part of a sustained aesthetic strategy to deconstruct the ideological and symbolic constructions of the so-called Third Reich. Through the figure of Oskar Matzerath — whose self-imposed unwillingness to grow up subverts prevailing narratives of linear development, historical progress and ideological sameness — Grass builds a counterhistory founded on distortion, fragmentation, rhythm and narrative instability. Oskar's malformattedr body is not just a physical mutation but also a politically inscribed site of resistance to fascism (with fascism defined as valorization of order, discipline, and the perfect body). Evocative of Mikhail Bakhtin's terms carnivalesque and grotesque realism, Theodor Adorno's assessment of fascist spectacle and mass culture, and Michel Foucault's work on disciplinary power and the regulation of bodies, this study argues that Oskar's anarchic drumming/ glass-shattering voice reveal the performative fragility beneath authoritarian structures. His jarring rhythms overturn synchronized Nazi spectacle rituals, turning order into disorder and exposing the contingent nature of power. This study critically examines the ways in which the author of The Tin Drum utilizes a novel's narrative style to engage with the larger critical discourse surrounding issues such as how to create historical accounts through historiography and collective memory, and how to grapple with guilt following World War II. By foregrounding the unreliable nature of narrative, Grass questions whether or not objective historical truth is even possible. Also, the study concludes that The Tin Drum presents an alternative view of history (i.e., as grotesque), reveals complicity on behalf of both the author and the audience (i.e., as something that requires ongoing ethical obligation), and rejects traditional notions of closure in order to continue to be read.

Keywords: Grotesque, Carnivalesque, Günter Grass, Fascism, Memory, Historiography, Oskar Matzerath

Introduction

Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* occupies a central place in postwar German literature for its radical and unsettling engagement with the legacy of Nazism. Emerging in a cultural moment

marked by silence, repression, and selective memory, the novel resists conventional realist strategies that seek to stabilize or neatly represent historical trauma. Instead, Grass employs grotesque exaggeration, absurd humor, and narrative instability as deliberate aesthetic choices to interrogate the construction of memory and the ethical implications of representing the past. By distorting reality rather than reproducing it, the novel challenges readers to confront the ideological and psychological distortions that enabled the rise of the Third Reich.

At the center of the narrative stands Oskar Matzerath, one of the most enigmatic figures in twentieth-century literature. His declaration—*"I decided…not to grow any more"*—signals a radical rejection of normative development and social integration. This refusal marks a decisive break from the developmental logic of the Bildungsroman, in which growth signifies maturity and assimilation into society. At the same time, it subverts fascist ideology, which equates progress with order, discipline, and the cultivation of a "perfect" body aligned with state ideals.

This paper argues that Oskar's arrested growth functions as an anti-teleological resistance to fascist ideology, disrupting linear narratives of progress and exposing their underlying coercion. Simultaneously, his incessant drumming operates as a form of carnivalesque subversion, destabilizing authoritarian spectacle through rhythm, parody, and disorder. Together, these elements reveal the Third Reich not as a monolithic or invincible structure, but as a fragile and performative system dependent on discipline, repetition, and symbolic control. By foregrounding grotesque embodiment and narrative instability, Grass transforms history into a contested, dynamic process that resists closure and demands critical engagement.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with *The Tin Drum* has consistently emphasized its grotesque aesthetics and historical significance, though interpretations diverge in important ways.

Wulf Koepke identifies the grotesque as central to Grass's method, arguing that distortion reveals the moral collapse of German society. Similarly, Wolfgang Kayser conceptualizes the grotesque as a mode of estrangement, which destabilizes perception and produces existential unease.

In contrast, Heinrich Vormweg interprets Oskar's arrested growth as escapism rather than resistance, suggesting that his refusal to mature reflects a broader cultural avoidance of guilt. This critique complicates celebratory readings of Oskar as a subversive figure.

Alexander Stephan situates the novel within historiographic discourse, arguing that Grass constructs a counter-memory that challenges official narratives. This aligns with Hayden White's view that history is narratively constructed rather than objectively given.

From a theoretical perspective, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival has been widely applied to the novel. Critics such as Michael Hollington emphasize the subversive potential of Oskar's performances, particularly in scenes where authority is mocked and inverted.

However, Theodor Adorno's critique of mass culture complicates such readings by highlighting how spectacle can reinforce, rather than undermine, ideology. This tension is central to interpreting Oskar's drumming.

Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power provides another key framework. Scholars like Eric L. Santner read Oskar's stasis as resistance to biopolitical control.

More recent critics, including Stuart Taberner, stress the ethical ambiguity of the novel, arguing that it implicates both narrator and reader in structures of guilt.

This paper builds on these debates by arguing that *The Tin Drum* does not resolve the tension between resistance and complicity but instead sustains it through grotesque and carnivalesque strategies.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three key theoretical perspectives:

- Bakhtin's Carnivalesque: Explains inversion, grotesque bodies, and subversion of hierarchy
- Adorno's Fascist Spectacle: Highlights discipline, repetition, and ideological performance
- Foucault's Disciplinary Power: Frames the body as a site of control and resistance

Together, these frameworks illuminate how Oskar's body and actions disrupt systems of power.

Grotesque Arrest: Refusal and Resistance

Oskar's choice to cease growing—*"I remained three years old"*—represents a profound repudiation of conventional development and the ideological assumptions inherent in it. His intentional descent—*"I threw myself down the stairs"*—constitutes not merely an act of juvenile defiance but a symbolic severance from teleological progress, signifying a deliberate retreat from the linear path of maturation. In this way, Oskar refuses to live in a world where authority, discipline, and complicity are important. He sees his stunted growth as a way of showing his disagreement.

This refusal directly goes against fascist ideas that see physical perfection, sameness, and a well-behaved body as signs of national strength. Oskar's short, strange, and ugly body is very different from the ideal Aryan body that the regime promotes. His physical abnormality thus serves as a subversive counter-image, revealing the constructed and exclusionary essence of such ideals.

Simultaneously, Oskar's enduring infantilism serves as a crucial lens that exposes the moral deficiencies of the adult realm. Even though he still looks like a child, the adults around him are stuck in their moral beliefs and don't question them. In this context, "growth" loses its positive meaning and is instead seen as a process of ideological submission rather than real moral or intellectual growth.

The Grotesque Body and the Politics of Disruption

Oskar's body is a place of political and aesthetic resistance because it doesn't follow the rules set by society, ideology, and discipline. His extraordinary ability to shatter glass with his voice—*"Glass splintered under my voice"*—is more than a mere fantastical element; it symbolizes a violent disruption of order, clarity, and transparency, which are themselves hallmarks of authoritarian control. By physically breaking the structures around him, Oskar critiques the systems of power in a bodily way, showing how the body can change, undermine, and destabilize established hierarchies.

This destructive potential closely corresponds with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of grotesque realism, which posits the body as inherently excessive, open, and transformative. In grotesque realism, the body goes beyond normal limits, making it hard to tell the difference between inside and outside, self and environment, life and death. Oskar's body embodies these ideas: his short stature, childlike looks, and amazing abilities make him both weak and strong, on the outside and on the inside.

Through this grotesque embodiment, Grass positions Oskar's body as a site of resistance to disciplinary power, exposing the vulnerability of social, political, and ideological frameworks. Oskar's physical excesses disrupt normative behavioral expectations, illustrating that rebellion can manifest through both action and form, and that the body may function as a conduit for political critique and carnivalesque subversion.

The Tin Drum as Instrument of Subversion

The tin drum is Oskar Matzerath's most important tool for fighting back, both physically and figuratively. *"My drum is indispensable."* The drum is more than just a musical instrument for Oskar; it also gives him control over rhythm, memory, and story. Oskar uses drumming to take control of his environment and the events that happen around him, which goes against the rigid rules set by society and the authoritarian state. The drum's steady, unpredictable beats act as a kind of embodied rebellion, turning everyday places into places of resistance.

One notable instance is when Oskar's drumming turns a planned march into chaos at a political rally: *"The march became a waltz"* (Grass 110). This is a great example of Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque, which is when social hierarchies and ritualized authority are turned on their heads for a short time. The drum's happy, chaotic beats break up the strict, regimented order that is part of Nazi spectacle. Oskar's intervention shows how weak authority is by showing that power depends just as much on performance and symbolic coherence as it does on force or ideology.

In this way, the drum is not merely a musical object but a tool of political and narrative disruption. It transforms space and time, undermines the spectacle of fascist authority, and foregrounds the capacity of the grotesque and the absurd to destabilize rigid systems. Through drumming, Grass reveals the performative foundations of power and the potential of individual, embodied rebellion to challenge it.

Carnival and the Collapse of Authority

In The Tin Drum, carnival ideals and macabre humor are effective means of subverting authoritarian rule. Grass frequently exaggerates the ridiculousness of Nazi rites, parades, and public events to the point of farce, depicting them as theatrical productions. Uniforms, salutes, and marches—symbols of power—lose their weight when viewed through this lens, exposing their reliance on ritualized repetition and public obedience rather than innate legitimacy. Fascist spectacle's ideological seriousness is undermined by the bizarre reversal of authority, which exposes its performative fragility by turning power into a source of comedic spectacle.

However, these scenes make people chuckle in a very conflicted way. The violence, tyranny, and moral horror that underlie the rule are not eradicated by humor, even when it undermines the impression of control. Rather, the story's ethical tension is heightened by the cohabitation of comedy and atrocity, which serves as a reminder to readers that the grotesque never completely liberates; rather, it highlights inconsistencies without resolving them. Oskar's portrayal of the Reich reveals it to be a hideous thing in and of itself—unsteady,

extravagant, and ultimately self-destructive. Its authority depends on discipline and spectacle, but the same processes that project power also make it susceptible to interference. Because fascist rule is both terrifyingly real and fundamentally absurd, Grass's carnivalistic tactics draw attention to its paradoxical character and encourage contemplation of the performative and flimsy underpinnings of totalitarian power.

Narrative Instability and Ethical Ambiguity

The Tin Drum's first-person narrator by Oskar Matzerath constantly blurs the line between fact and fiction, evoking a sense of narrative instability that reflects the fractured structure of memory itself. Declaring, *"I am a patient, yes—but also a witness"* (Grass 5), he acknowledges the subjectivity and unreliability inherent in his perspective while yet asserting authority over the relaying of events. By highlighting the fact that both individual and collective memory are always filtered, selective, and possibly distorted, Oskar's dual function as participant and spectator challenges traditional historiography. His untrustworthiness is a reflection of the larger challenge of depicting pain, especially the moral and cultural disasters of the Third Reich.

Oskar's narrative complicity also draws attention to the moral issues surrounding resistance. He deliberately subverts authoritarian spectacle and defies fascist expectations, yet he is still intricately linked to the moral and social structures he seems to be against. His aggressive, disorderly, and occasionally self-serving interventions cast doubt on the idea of pure, innocent opposition and highlight how complicity and rebellion are inextricably linked to human conduct.

As Oskar acknowledges, *"I drum up my story"* (Grass 12), storytelling itself becomes theatrical. According to this interpretation, history is actively created and molded by viewpoint, memory, and creative action rather than merely being recovered or recorded. The ethical and epistemological difficulties of facing the past are highlighted by Grass's storytelling technique: memory is mediated, truth is erratic, and narrating history constantly requires balancing complicity, interpretation, and witnessing.

Finally, it can be observed that the interplay between Oskar's grotesque arrest and his carnivalesque subversion foregrounds the novel's central tension: resistance is inseparable from complicity. While Oskar actively disrupts authoritarian authority through his stunted body, anarchic drumming, and grotesque interventions, he remains embedded within the social and moral structures of the regime he critiques. This duality mirrors the broader condition of postwar Germany, in which collective guilt, ethical compromise, and historical trauma are unresolved and pervasive. Grass's deployment of grotesque realism challenges conventional historiography, demonstrating that exaggeration, distortion, and absurdity can reveal ethical and psychological truths about human behavior and societal complicity that conventional realism cannot capture.

Conclusion

The Tin Drum converts the history of the Third Reich into a grotesque, volatile, and profoundly conflicted tale, whereby traditional concepts of linearity, progress, and moral clarity are consistently undermined. Oskar Matzerath's refusal to mature—*"I remained three years old"*—and his subversive drumming serve as essential mechanisms for deconstructing the intellectual frameworks of fascism. Through these actions, Grass elucidates the vulnerability of authoritarian power, demonstrating that the regime's authority relies equally

on ritualistic performance, coordinated behavior, and symbolic repetition, in addition to coercion and ideology.

The novel simultaneously rejects the solace of ethical resolution. Oskar's involvement, narrative unreliability, and the simultaneous presence of terror and absurdity hinder readers from making straightforward determinations regarding guilt or innocence. Memory, pain, and resistance are inherently unstable, highlighting the manufactured and interpretative aspects of historical representation. Grass compels readers to grapple with the intricacies of history, moral accountability, and the precariousness of narrative truth, illustrating that comprehending the past necessitates ongoing critical engagement rather than conclusive conclusion.

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