

CHARLES BURNS' BLACK HOLE AND THE AMERICAN GROTESQUE

Škomrlj, Jakov Andro

Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2020

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **University of Split, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Split / Sveučilište u Splitu, Filozofski fakultet**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:172:207411>

Rights / Prava: [In copyright](#)/[Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2025-03-21**

Repository / Repozitorij:

[Repository of Faculty of humanities and social sciences](#)



SVEUČILIŠTE U SPLITU

FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET

ODSJEK ZA ENGLJSKI JEZIK I KNJIŽEVNOST

CHARLES BURNS' BLACK HOLE AND THE AMERICAN GROTESQUE

Split, 2020.

UNIVERSITY OF SPLIT

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

CHARLES BURNS' BLACK HOLE AND THE
AMERICAN GROTESQUE

STUDENT:

Jakov Andro Škomrlj

MENTOR:

Izv.prof.dr.sc. Brian Daniel Willems

CONTENTS

1. Introduction
2. The Term *Grotesque*
3. European Grotesque
4. American Grotesque
5. Black Hole Grotesque
6. Conclusion
7. Abstract
8. Sažetak
9. Bibliography

1. INTRODUCTION

The graphic novel I will discuss in this thesis is Charles Burns' *Black Hole* (1995-2005), a horror story that deals with themes of alienation, coming of age and teenage anxiety, search for meaning, and life in a suburban America. The graphic novel is widely recognized, winning the Harvey and Ignatz awards, among others.

In *Black Hole*, the reader follows the stories of two protagonists: Keith, a male teenager whose days consist of smoking marijuana with his friends and not doing much else, and Chris, a female teenager who is opposite to Keith – she is a “straight A” student who can be considered a good example to others. The main horror part of the story happens when both protagonists are involved with “the Bug” – a sexually transmitted disease that can variably change the appearance of those who are infected – and they react to it in different ways.

Sexual imagery is prominent throughout the novel, seeing that the Bug is transmitted via sexual intercourse, and in the very beginning, in the chapter “Biology 101,” a dissected frog is in the shape of female genitalia. The title of the chapter itself refers to some of the book's themes – change that happens in human anatomy and sexual experiences that the protagonists go through. This will become important to a number of aspects of my discussion below.

Since it is a horror book that can be quite graphic and brutal with its images, the term 'grotesque' often came to my mind while reading the book – and I was not the only one with those impressions. Because of that one word, I decided to explore further the literary term that is the grotesque and its two types, European and American. Although those two terms can relate to some aspects of the book, they do not fully match with it, so in addition to European and American grotesque there will be a third one explained in this thesis: the *Black Hole grotesque*, an unique blend.

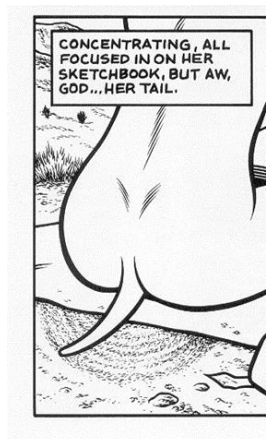
Numerous types of sources are used in this thesis, ranging from interviews with the author to books such as *The Grotesque: Bloom's Literary Themes* and articles such as “On the Grotesque in Science Fiction. I bring these various texts together in order to develop my thesis of *Black Hole Grotesque*: a combination of both European and the American Grotesque of sorts, and even more specific combination of comic book genres, both horror and teen comics popular in 1950’s and 1960’s, which were highly popular in America at the time they were published.

2. THE TERM *GROTESQUE*

One definition of the term grotesque is as follows, according to the Cambridge dictionary, it is “strange and unpleasant, especially in a silly or a frightening way, with synonyms such as hideous, ugly and unattractive” (dictionary.cambridge.org).



The image above, taken from the back cover, can be described as grotesque, due to the unnatural and distorted face of the person depicted. There is even an example of a silly (as in the Cambridge dictionary definition) grotesque:



However, when it comes to the literary definition of the grotesque, things are a bit more complicated than simply describing something as ugly or unpleasant. In his article “The Grotesque: First Principles,” Geoffrey Harpham states that there are “...four subdivisions that

can be represented, albeit crudely, as follows: caricature, comic grotesque, (ludicrous or satiric), fantastic grotesque (terrible) or Gothic-macabre” (Harpham, 464). Since it is not a work of humorous nature, *Black Hole* could either fall in the category of the fantastic grotesque or the Gothic macabre. According to the Cambridge dictionary definition, the macabre is “...used to describe something that is very strange and unpleasant because it is connected with death or violence” (dictionary.cambridge.org). Even though the novel contains a fair amount of death and violence, it is predominantly a fantastic grotesque because the main source of fear or displeasure is due to the changes that happen to the character's bodies: even the book’s front cover portrays teenagers in the style of yearbook pictures, and the back cover portrays the teenagers affected by “the Bug” who are now deformed, hinting the reader what is the main focus of the story.



Black Hole back cover

According to the Cambridge dictionary, the definition of word *fantastic* is something that is “...strange and imaginary, or not reasonable” and which is “...very unusual, strange or unexpected” (dictionary.cambridge.org). Even literally fantastic events are present in the book. The disease is strange and unexpected and the dreams the characters have are imaginary and unreasonable, often starting simply and transforming into more and more bizzare imagery.

However, these examples do not only fit the above quote from Harpham, but they also relate to the following: “one of the most frequent ways for an artist to use the grotesque in this limited way is through the creation of grotesque characters. And one of the most obvious ways to effect this alienation is through physical deformity” (Harpham, 465). Most of the deformed characters in the book experience some type of alienation, from the bullying that Liz suffers to the prejudices and looks that some of more explicitly diseased teenagers are subjected to while living in town, and they felt so alienated from society that they literally built their own little camp in the forrest.

In addition to Harpham's principles and subcategories of the grotesque, there are two types of grotesque mentioned in (not only) *Bloom's Literary Guide*: the European grotesque and the American grotesque. Although a section is devoted to each type below, I will briefly elaborate them here.

The European Grotesque was not initially perceived as negative – in “Modern American Grotesque” William Goodwin claims that “...In early English usages, the effect of the grotesque upon an observer or reader is associated with fancy and the lightly humorous rather than with fear or the nightmarish, but by the end of the seventeenth century such connections are made” (Goodwin, 8). In addition, this type of the grotesque could be described as the “...unique combination of terror, fear, beauty, and laughter” (Bloom, 2).

However, in later usage the European grotesque was strongly linked to the absurd and, in a way, the absurd is often the first term that comes to mind while hearing the word grotesque:

In the final instance tragedy is an appraisal of human fate, measure of the absolute. The grotesque is a criticism of the absolute in the name of frail human experience. That is why tragedy brings catharsis, while grotesque offers no consolation whatsoever . . . In the world of the grotesque, downfall cannot be justified by, or

blamed on, the absolute. The absolute is not endowed with any ultimate reasons; it is stronger, and that is all. The absolute is absurd. Maybe that is why the grotesque often makes use of the concept of a mechanism which has been put in motion and cannot be stopped. (Kott, 9)

Many of the characters who contacted the disease experienced no positive change or character growth, nor did they become nobler; they only became even frailer. The fragility of their spirit became even more obvious, with no catharsis whatsoever.

On the other hand, the American Grotesque has some notable differences as stated in Bloom:

American Grotesque still flows from a basic American optimism about the possibilities of democracy, religion, money, goods, power, conflicting with an increasing pessimism about the corporate and military forces that dominate our country. *American Grotesque*, then, creates an energetic style of vision that still searches for belief in a way that European visions of *grotesque* have given up. It is impossible for *American Grotesque* to be absurdist in the European sense of Camus' Definition... *American Grotesque*, the sad, searching patron of beauty, struggles to balance the intolerable weight of fantasies that shatter the sky with the glow of their singular distortions. (Bloom, 10)

The protagonists try to get out of the state they are in in the sense of searching for a better life, whether it means escaping from society that judges them and makes them feel alienated or finding a romantic partner. They do their best and refuse to give up, not making their lives meaningless. However, the truth or so called realness and cruelty of life make it harder for them to find true happiness.

And lastly, in "Modern American Grotesque" by William Goodwin, there is yet another definition which can be applied:

On a formal level, the modern grotesque relies more often upon a set of appearances than upon a series of events. In modern literary and graphic modes alike, the grotesque is predominantly visual and descriptive rather than ideational or narrative. Not confined to expository or explanatory functions, the modern grotesque stands at a threshold to alluring, intimidating obscurity. (Goodwin, 26)

The most obviously grotesque part of *Black Hole is* is definitely its visual identity, its representation of the disease, the characters, and their dreams or fantasies. Although the story has many interesting elements despite inverting some of the clichés found in teen comics, it would not be what it is had it not been for its body horror elements which make the graphic novel such a specific and interesting work of literature that stands out among other comics. In addition to the visual style, *Black Hole* indeed does not offer direct explanations for as why the disease is the way it is – it simply happens.

3. EUROPEAN GROTESQUE

An example of the European (English) grotesque in the lightly humorous and unique combination of terror, fear, beauty, and laughter found in the chapter “Bag Action” of *Black Hole* in which Keith and his friends visit some college students who sell them marijuana. When Keith and company started smoking, he felt like he did in the previous scenes which included his friends being – out of place and uninterested. “...I wanted to be somewhere nice. Some place where I wouldn't have to listen to a bunch of burnt out college dipshits talking the talk.” (Burns, 5, vol. 6 *Black Hole*). Instantly after those thoughts, Keith goes to the kitchen and meets Liz (mockingly nicknamed The Lizard Queen) who instantly interests him. His entrance to the kitchen is presented scarily and described like it was straight out of a horror story, and then the twist comes – after four dark panels in which Keith's head is in a somewhat claustrophobic look, the page's last panel introduces Liz and the its white color is a noticeable contrast to the buildup. As Goodwin stated: “...In early English usages, the effect of the grotesque upon an observer or reader is associated with fancy and the lightly humorous rather than with fear or the nightmarish, but by the end of the seventeenth but by the end of the seventeenth century such connections are made” (Goodwin, 8)



The protagonist then stares at her, admiring the details: her eyes, breasts and hair. “She did a little dance...it was sweet, something a little kid would do. I couldn't help but smiling” (Burns, 6 vol. 4 *Black Hole*), he says and continues talking to her. Then, the most (European) grotesque part of the chapter starts; the “...unique combination of terror, fear, beauty, and laughter” (Bloom, 2)



Keith follows Liz to her room which is located downstairs – a cave, or grotto, after which the term “grotesque” is named (Goodwin, 17), is also below the ground level. Liz's “cave” is full of paintings depicting strange mixtures of people and animals, or animals with some parts of human anatomy. Even her pipe is an ornament, a skull of a phallic shape. Keith has seen something he has never seen before and the encounter will prove crucial for him in the rest of the book.



He even states that he “...drifted. It was like walking into another world” (Burns, 13, vol. 4 *Black Hole*).

When he is in “the cave,” he sees dark paintings and the lighting is dark, but his thoughts are not, he is in such awe of the paintings that he feels positive and is drawn to her even more, as it can be seen literally in the panel progression below:



As for the “beauty” part, Keith is attracted to Liz, which is made clear in the following panel.



The panel progression depicting her tail shows us how he perceives it: he becomes more and more absorbed by it and again, it starts as a mostly black panel, and in the end white dominates and the narration becomes less and less. In addition to visual narration, the protagonist confirms it with a quite explicit statement. “She was wolfing down her sandwich in big bites, like she was starving...and even that was sexy” (Burns, 13. vol. 4 *Black Hole*).



This is similar to a panel showing them going down the stairs, Liz's face is dominating the panel, gaining more space as the story progresses. First he was focused on her body and now, after seeing her art, he is focused on her face in addition to being sexually attracted. It is like she seduces him a bit for numerous times even though they have just met.

After the talk about her art she tries to explicitly seduce him and have sex with him, although he tells her about Chris. She makes advances but he can't get Chris out of his head. Despite Chris in his thoughts, a change happens:



In a progression of three panels where the first two have Chris in Keith's mind, as the upper part of the panel has wavy lines. After the two panels where he is thinking about Chris, the third one shows Liz's tail. Chris is slowly getting replaced in his fantasies with Liz:



Before Keith and Liz can have any kind of sexual activity, they are interrupted by Liz's roommate. After he sees them he leaves the room and the atmosphere between them has changed a bit and Keith starts to talk awkwardly, implied with numerous use of ellipsis such as: "...so...it was real nice meeting you...thanks for showing me your artwork and everything..." and "...I

uh...I really can't. I don't mean to rush out or anything, but..." (Burns, 29, vol. 4 *Black Hole*).

In the last panel, Keith and Liz are not in close up anymore – they are separated and awkward, but they say they will see each other and they keep their word.



Their encounter is a good example because it mixes the elements of grotesque such as fear and beauty quite well and is also mildly humorous in the manner they meet each other. Liz has a tail which is by itself out of the ordinary but Keith does not react like it is something extremely unusual and is sexually drawn to that fact. Visually the scenes begin somewhat scary but with a sense of Keith being at ease with the strangeness he encounters. He is also in awe of her paintings which even though they are dark result with positive reactions from him except one painting. This scene causes, in a sense, a disproportion with what reader expects and what he gets: Keith is feeling more comfortable in a room full of dark paintings than with stoner college guys, telling anecdotes about doing stupid things while high. Hence, this is an example of European grotesque because although Liz has supernatural attributes the accent is on Keith impression of the meeting: fear and beauty.

Apart from the visual representation of early European grotesque elaborated above, there is also a narrative relation to it, and that is the Bug and how the characters react to it. One of the

most important things about the Bug is the fact that it is "...a mechanism that cannot be stopped," a phrase already mentioned (Kott, 9). There is no instance in which the characters try to find the cure for "the Bug" or something like that, they only try to live with it as best as they can.

In the "On the Grotesque in Science Fiction" there can be found the following: "...the grotesque is life set free of law" (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr, 82) which fits into the European part of "...criticism of the absolute in the name of frail human experience. That is why tragedy brings catharsis, while grotesque offers no consolation whatsoever" (Kott, 9). The diseased teenagers, in search for a better life after contacting "the Bug" set out to build their own society, only for it to fail and have its members commit murders and not following societies' rules, or to go away. There is no "solution" to the problem of the Bug, "no consolation whatsoever," as quoted above.

4. AMERICAN GROTESQUE

Chapter “SSSSSSSSSS” of *Black Hole* is one of the first in the book with explicit supernatural imagery, and is in the vein of Poe's concrete situation in which the chaos prevails and which deal with terrible, incomprehensible, inexplicable, bizarre, fantastic, and nocturnal happenings (Kayser, 57); the inexplicable part is that it is a chaotic dream. One important thing about it is that it begins with a dream, but even when the protagonists' dream ends, the supernatural element is still present. The author differs dreams from reality by changing the shape of the panel borders: when the characters dream, panel borders are wavy. The dream starts relatively normal, as the reader sees three young men from Chris' perspective.

In the third panel of the dream, it gets strange.

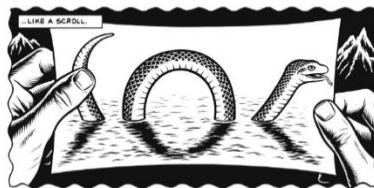


Where the male genitals should be, an unspecified shape which resembles a pig's tail takes place, probably due to the fact that at the time of the dream Chris has met numerous infected people. After that, another relatively natural image is there.

However, after Chris gets a piece of glass stuck in her foot, the craziness ensues. The wound in her foot is in a shape of female genitals.



She takes a (scroll of) paper out of the wound, which then turns out to have numerous meanings. No matter how much the picture ‘zooms’ there is no end, which is most possibly a fear of Chris' that her state will never end. The scroll begins with a picture of a snake and the dream ends with a snake suffocating Chris.



Chris is the only person in her dreams to retain human characteristics, as even Keith, who tries to help her, turns into a snake. When she sees Keith, he is the only one who has a

completely human form – the others are not explicitly infected but their physiomy and facial expressions are somewhat animalistic.



Keith (whose name she does not know) has good intentions but even that cannot help her and feels like she is being strangled. His politeness gradually turns into a serious threat, as he takes more and more space in the panel, with his transformation into a snake is such that the only part of his body that remained human is his head.



The 'cut' from dream to reality is quite juxtaposing. While in the dream Keith's head was at the top, now it is Chris' head on the bottom, sweating intensely. Where the snake used to strangle her now lies the wrapped blanket. The next page contains the biggest shock of the chapter.



Chris' skin on her back is ripped, also in the shape of female genitalia, and she takes off her skin, like some kind of a snake.



She looks at her skin with disgust and cries, throwing it away. In the dream she was suffocated by the snake but in the reality, she is one. Her nightmares became real.

In addition to the fantastic, American grotesque also includes “the sad, searching patron of beauty” and “struggle of weighing the fantasies with reality” (Bloom, 11). Although the comic is far from an optimistic work of fiction, it has some moments in which the protagonists express their hope for a better future, or at least strength and possibility of overcoming their initial problems and hardships. And, arguably, the most obvious examples can be found in the penultimate chapter of the book, titled “Driving South.” Maybe the best indicator of the characters optimistic mindset is the chapters title font; most chapters have ‘cold’, ‘mechanical’

fonts (such as Courier in the chapter “I’m sorry”) or fonts that are made of distorted letters and remind the readers of the horror genre (chapter “Racing towards something”) and this chapter has, for the first time in the book, a handwritten font.

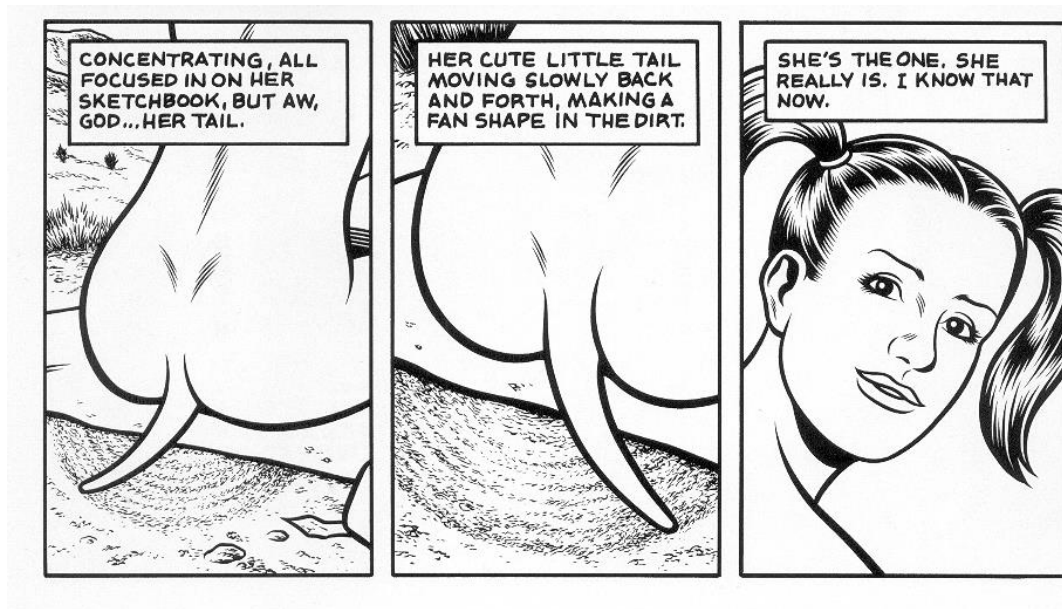


“Driving South” splash page

Not only is the font handwritten, alluding to the characters humanity and nature, but also the color white and daylight which dominate the page contrast the dark and supernatural previous splash pages which presented severed hands and dissected frogs.



“Eliza sitting naked on a pink towel. So beautiful I could die” (Burns, 14, vol. 11 *Black Hole*). Those are the opening lines of the chapter. Although they mention death, which is to keep the tone of the story, it is on a positive note. The next three vertical panels show Eliza's “cute little tail, moving slowly back and forth, making a fan shape in the dirt” (Burns, 14 vol. 11 *Black Hole*). And in the third panel, he proclaims: “She's the one she really is. I know by now” (Burns, 14 vol. 11 *Black Hole*).



The close up panel of Eliza's face is followed on the next page by close up panel of Keith's face, as it says that they understand each other even without talking. “I called her up at the last

minute...right when we were getting ready to leave...and now there she is. It's impossible” (Burns, 15, vol. 11 *Black Hole*).

The word ‘impossible’ is important in this panel: Keith spent the beginning of his story fantasizing about Chris during the biology class and in this, penultimate chapter, he describes the girl he is with as impossible, mentioning her tail, which is an animal feature. In addition to the tail being an animal feature, it can even “elicit sense of awe and acceptance” (Heimermann, 101). Kom Kunyosying writes that “...in contrast to Chris, Eliza is comfortable with her mutation, her tail. She is also the character most comfortable with her sexuality” (Kunyosving, 567). That is why Keith is drawn to her: as someone who is not sexually experienced and also an outcast - he is enamoured with someone who is a “positive” outcast, a person not ashamed of who she is despite her mutations. In an unusual way a part of his fantasies has become real. Another thing which cannot be ignored is the fact that both of them are naked, which can be perceived as being relaxed and what is more important at peace with their bodies, which we know are diseased, although not in an extreme way such as some other infected teenagers that appear in the book.



The next few pages of the chapter tell the story of murders that happened and the students who bullied Eliza, so it ends on a bit sour note, making it not completely in synchronization with optimism of American grotesque but the last panel is still the two of them of that hill, about

which Eliza says that she “feels like she is back where she belongs,” so there is a some kind of hope. Also, anothe part of American grotesque that is not present at all is “...the corporate and military forces that dominate our country,” since there are no mentions of neither American army or the corporate economic world. (Bloom, 10)

5. BLACK HOLE GROTESQUE

The final part of this paper is the *Black Hole* grotesque, which can be identified by two aspects: the first is how Burns merges the two genres, the teen comics and horror. Every chapter of the book, while it of course shows the European and American grotesque, combines these two genres somehow.

The second aspect of the *Black Hole* grotesque is its autobiographical element. In an interview (<http://www.edrants.com/interview-with-charles-burns/>) Burns has stated how his life in the suburbia affected him. He somehow wanted to insert himself, give the interesting “edge” to that mundane, suburban everyday life. This fits, at least a bit, with the William Carlos Williams quote from *Bloom’s Literary Guide*:

“I lived among these people. I knew them and saw the essential qualities (not stereotype), the courage, the humor (an accident), the deformity, the basic tragedy of their lives—and the importance of it. You can’t write about something unimportant to yourself. I was involved.” (Bloom, 8)

However, one part that does not fit with the quote is the characters part, as Burns stated: “...but I’m not comfortable with that too much. I’m good at creating ciphers, but I’m not great at characters, at real whole people. At least I haven’t been so far. I don’t know why I’m uncomfortable with that, but I’m better at doing two-dimensional characters that symbolize other things, rather than having a story revealed through a more personal episode, or a more naturalistic form of storytelling. That just comes down to what I am and who I am” (<http://www.tcj.com/the-charles-burns-interview-by-darcy-sullivan/2/>). Related to the “cipher” part, Kunyosying gives an example of Keith developing a “...tadpole tales growing out of sides of his ribs evoking the frog he dissected in the first chapter” (Kunyosying, 566) and Chris whose “...symptom is a constantly shedding skin” (Kunyosying, 566). In addition he states that their

diseases symbolize something else, hence becoming a cipher in a way – another part of Burns’ innovation, turning people inspired by the real part of his life into symbols .

A good example of the merging of the two genres can be seen the chapter “Windowpane” (issue #6). The very first page ts the negative tone of the chapter. Keith is in the room with his parents who watch “...some crappy made for T.V. movie” (Burns, 1 vol. 6 *Black Hole*). Parents, who are usually in works of ficion described as warm and wise do not even have their names here, and they even look a bit frightening.



Later his friends pick him up and the go to Jill's place, a girl with whom one of Keith's friends, Dee, is “romantically” interested in. When they arrive at her house, they meet Jill and her older sister (whose appearance fits the trope of a teen romance comic, which will be elaborated later). The psychedelic drug Keith and company took in the car start to take effect and something that was initially a usual teen date party starts to acquire horror tropes. Keith goes to the bathroom and looks at the mirror and “...his heart was hammering in his chest and his eyes were all black and to scary to look at” (Burns, 12, vol. 6 *Black Hole*). The angles from which the reader sees Keith is also starting to get bit skewed.



As he looks at the picture, it seems like it is morphed with the real world, with Chris being shown in it. Chris is slowly getting closer to Keith and he starts to hear noises from Jill's room in which she has sex with Dee – even the shape of the word bubbles starts to imply how Keith perceives the sounds he hears.



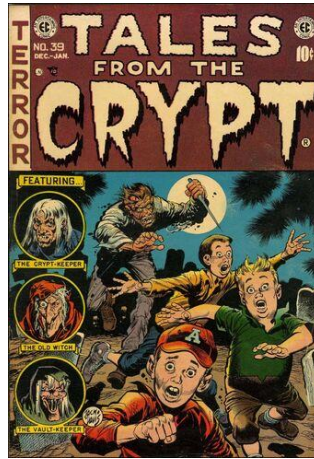
The next page presents something straight out of a horror: uncomfortable closeup, weird sounds and a lot of darkness. What happens in the page is actually nothing that would be exceptionally scary in the real life: Keith enters the living room where his friend, who is under the influence of drugs, watches television. But the way he is describing it is out of a horror: “His face had changed. The skin was all pulled back in a horrible grin and his teeth were showing. Suddenly his body started shaking and he let out an awful barking sound. It took me a while to realize he was laughing” (Burns, 14, vol. 6 *Black Hole*).



This is the *Black Hole* grotesque: taking a relatively ordinary moment and describing and presenting it as horror fiction.

What is also interesting is the way how American pop culture is in a way a core of the story, and what is in a way essentially American about this book: the plot itself is a combination of two quite American comic book genres: romance and horror. On the one hand, there is a horror story with the characters who seem like they visually belong to comic book magazines

such as *Tales from the Crypt* and common used horror tropes such as disturbing dolls and murders and are introduced later in the book.



Tales from the Crypt, Issue #39

On the other hand, both protagonists Chris and Keith, are preoccupied with the “usual” teenage problems – how to get noticed by a person they like, what to make of their so called love life. Harpham quotes Mark Spilka who says that “...for one thing, the child's view of the world is literally oblique; he stands below the sight-line of adult activity, for which the man made scene is built. For another, his view is often animistic.... He also lacks control of inner promptings, and projects them into the scene before him, as we do in dreams. Finally, his affective innocence . . . proves reassuring as the world around him cracks and topples” (Harpham, 464). Even though tough things happen to them, the protagonists are not yet fully formed persons and that is one of the things that affect their perspective. Burns also acknowledged the influence of teen comics dating from the fifties and sixties.

The best “clue“ how to read the book and decipher its meaning is in the two first pages: first page tells the reader of silly teenagers who are “putting the whole tough guy act” while dissecting frogs in front of girls, and the second page shows Keith in a lighting and shading that is primarily found in horror genre, along with the angle from which he is seen and the commentary: “...I felt like I was looking into the future...and the future looked really messed

up” (Burns, 2, vol. 1 *Black Hole*). In addition to the comic’s opening, Heimermann states that usage of the grotesque “...complicates clear distinction between childhood and adulthood, as well as between not belonging and belonging. Its adolescent characters do not just feel freakish as they change from child to adult, they become monstrous” (Heimermann, 93). The last part that points at importance of adolescence to the story, also noticed by Heimermann is that “...we do not see any adults with the Bug. It is an adolescent concern” (Heimermann, 103).

All of this shows the reader how specific the *Black Hole* grotesque is. This type of grotesque has a heavy use of symbolism, a number of postmodern references, and an unseen combination of genres which is what makes it a completely novel type of it.

6. CONCLUSION

Black Hole is a work of graphic fiction that made a big number of readers intrigued due to its interesting combination of (body) horror and coming of age drama. Its strength mostly lies in powerful imagery. The images are not only present due to shock value but they also work because the characters are genuinely interesting even though the author simply calls them ciphers.

The term 'grotesque' can have many literary types and subcategories. In addition to the unusual manner in which the genres are combined, the graphic novel offers many similarities to that term and its types. The early English perception of the word, European hopelessness, American grotesque and its visual representaton of dreams and its optimism. Not only it deals with the two types of grotesque, it also presents a new type of grotesque in form of what I called *Black Hole* grotesque: an influence of both European and American grotesque with a mixture of genres mentioned above and pop culture, which makes *Black Hole* quite original and unique.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is about Charles Burns' graphic novel *Black Hole* and its themes and how it deals with the two types of the literary term grotesque, the two being European and American Grotesque, and the third, original one being *Black Hole* grotesque. The graphic novel makes a specific blend of genres and types of grotesque and makes its own.

SAŽETAK

Ovaj završni rad je o grafičkom romanu Charlesa Burnsa *Crna Rupa* autora i njegovoj tematici te o dva tipa književnog pojma groteske: Američkom i Europskom i o trećem, originalnom tipu svojstvenom *Crnoj Rupi*. Grafički roman ima specifičnu mješavinu žanrova i tipova groteske, čim pravi svoju, novu vrstu tog pojma,

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SOURCES

1. Burns, Charles, *Black Hole #4*, Kitchen Sink Press, Florence, 1995
2. Burns, Charles, *Black Hole #4*, Kitchen Sink Press, Florence, 1997
3. Burns, Charles, *Black Hole #6*, Fantagraphics Inc., Seattle, 1998
4. Burns, Charles, *Black Hole #11*, Fantagraphics Inc., Seattle, 2003
5. Grottesque definition, dictionary.cambridge.org, Accessed 5 August 2020
6. Macabre definition, dictionary.cambridge.org, Accessed 5 August 2020
7. Bloom, Harold , *Bloom's Literary Themes: The Grotesque*, Infobase Publishing, New York, 2009
8. Kayser, Wolfgang, "The Grotesque in the Age of Romanticism: Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque", *Bloom's Literary Themes: The Grotesque*, Harold Bloom, Infobase Publishing, New York, 2009 pp. 57-65
9. Carlos Williams, Williams, "A Beginning on the Short Story", *Bloom's Literary Themes: The Grotesque*, Harold Bloom, Infobase Publishing, New York, 2009
10. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. Istvan, "On the Grotesque in Science Fiction", *Science Fiction Studies*, Mar., 2002, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Mar., 2002), pp. 71-99
11. Goodwin , William, *Modern American Grotesque*, The Ohio State University, Columbus, 2009
12. Harpham, Geoffrey, "The Grotesque: First Principles", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Summer, 1976), pp. 461-468
13. Heimermann, Mark, "Grotesque Adolescence in Charles Burns' *Black Hole*", *Misfit Children: An Inquiry into Childhood Belongings*, Markus Bohlmann,, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2017, pp. 89-106

14. Kunyosying, Kom, "Horror Comics Ecology: Metonymy and Iconicity in Charles Burns's *Black Hole*", *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Summer 2014), pp. 562-574
15. <http://www.edrants.com/interview-with-charles-burns/>, Accessed 13 March 2020
16. <http://www.tcj.com/the-charles-burns-interview-by-darcy-sullivan/2/>, Accessed 13 March 2020