

**GROTESQUE DISCOVERIES AND DIVISIONS IN
W.S. MERWIN'S "THE FOLDING CLIFFS"**

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ABSTRACT

The epic narrative poem "The Folding Cliffs" by W.S. Merwin reflects the idea of truth as a grotesque and divisive concept. Because "The Folding Cliffs" is based on historical accounts and oral tradition, it could be posited that it is a nonfiction work or at the very least "based on a true story." This paper examines the concepts of truth and the grotesque and the innate relationship between the two. Establishing a definition of the grotesque, based on the ideas of Wolfgang Kayser, I identify four principles of the grotesque and use them as a lens for reading Merwin's work. The concept that truth is distorted has become especially pertinent in light of the emergence of creative-nonfiction and the debate over what constitutes truth. Using Merwin's piece as a vessel, I argue that truth is a fallacious concept, and that all so-called truths are fleeting and influenced by experiences and imagination.

The world we inhabit is distorted and divided—an idea made evident by the lack of clarity and cohesion among individuals and cultures. Indeed, any concept or action we attempt to universally clarify or illustrate is invariably made obscure by the simple fact that the world—at least as far as mankind is concerned—is complex and in a constant state of change. In a sense, any notion of truth we put into place is merely a marker for our progress thus far, apt to be moved or altered at any time. The arts are one such marker for us—a way to show we exist, have ideas and feelings, and also that we have discovered or arrived at “truths” even if they are distorted, fleeting and not collectively acknowledged.

Every individual has an imagination they utilize as they seek and establish meaning in the world, and everybody—to one degree or another—is a slave to their perceptions. In our minds we may challenge or distort so-called “truths” or “facts,” simply because we do not view or experience things the same as everybody else. Despite these divisions, many of us wish to share our experiences with one another by drawing from our ideas, perceptions and imagination. Artists and poets are no exception in their possession of imagination and a desire to share their experiences. Poets, however, are unique in that they “sing not from inspiration, a fullness of joy or knowledge...Instead, the poet writes from an obligation, an imperative that comes from within.”¹ In a sense, poets are burdened, and poetry is their way of alleviating or sharing that burden, along with insights and revelations they come to. Poets, it could be said, feel compelled to give some form and truth to the world, even if their forms and truths are as distorted as everybody else’s.

This obligation, as it may be called, for poets to paint and present a distorted and imagined song has given way to many complex and deep works, such as the book-length poem “The Folding Cliffs” by W.S. Merwin, a piece drawn from the author’s imagination and blended richly with historical account. Written in free verse, “The Folding Cliffs” is unbound and lends itself to many “truths;” especially when we consider its historical basis. But does the fact that “The Folding Cliffs” is based on a historical event make its truths any less distorted or divisive?

In a moment I will explore the concept of the grotesque in “The Folding Cliffs,” but first I would like to explore and establish a working concept of the grotesque. The grotesque is an idea that can be hard to define, in large part because of what Wolfgang Kayser termed its “accumulated meanings.”² According to Kayser the word grotesque—Italian “La grottesca” from “grotta” or cave—was coined during the Italian Renaissance as a form

of ornamental painting.³ The word later underwent many changes in meaning and was used to describe distorted and “humorous” artwork during the Romantic Movement and then to describe surrealism in the 20th century.⁴ For our purposes, the grotesque can be used to analyze the idea of truth. It is said the grotesque shows us that “...we see through a glass darkly; while we have the truth, we have it only partially. The grotesque...indicates the limitation of our ways of perceiving.”⁵ While this quote illustrates the relationship between the grotesque and truth, it does not fully conceptualize the grotesque or yield a definition. To establish a working definition, we turn to Wilson Yates who, in terms of researching and summarizing Kayser’s theory of the grotesque, has offered four main defining principles, they are: “(1) The grotesque is the estranged world; (2) the grotesque appears to be an expression of an incomprehensible, inexplicable and impersonal force; (3) the grotesque is a play with the absurd; and (4) the creation of the grotesque is an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world.”⁶

I would now like to explore the concept of the grotesque within Merwin’s work utilizing Kayser’s four aforementioned premises and relating them to passages or themes found within “The Folding Cliffs.” To start, I will take the first two premises, that the grotesque is the “estranged world” and that the grotesque appears to be an “expression of an incomprehensible, inexplicable and impersonal force.”⁷ These are, by far, the most obvious ideas to identify within “The Folding Cliffs.” The whole story is about estrangement and a land divided. In the first section of the book, we find Pi’ilani traveling alone to her husband—Ko’olau’s—grave to discern if it has been discovered and raided as has been rumored. In a sense, Pi’ilani has become alienated from her own land and culture, living in fear of her husband’s grave being raided by colonizers. According to Yates, “...the presentation of the grotesque is of an estranged or alienated world...a world that is a transformation of our world...in which the familiar and natural elements ‘suddenly turn out to be strange and ominous.’”⁸ Again, we can identify this concept early on in “The Folding Cliffs” where many things appear ominous and ideas and feelings of security once taken for granted are suddenly hollowed out. This trend of alienation and estrangement is continued in the next section, “The Mountain” where European colonizers arrive in Hawaii and begin to establish the divisions within the land. Introducing guns and diseases to the natives, the Europeans set in motion a chain of events which culminates—as far as “The Folding Cliffs” is concerned—with the division and estrangement of the Hawaiian people and

their land.⁹ Within “The Mountain” there is a great deal of chaos and confusion, which as Yates points out, is another aspect of the grotesque: “The grotesque is experienced as an incomprehensible force that has no name...we cannot relate ‘it’ [the grotesque] to the world we know; we have no orientation to comprehend it...what intrudes remains incomprehensible, inexplicable and impersonal.”¹⁰ This statement rings true for the occurrences in “The Mountain.” The intrusion by explorers and colonizers in this section is inexplicable for the natives and most certainly impersonal: “...land that had been theirs without ever belonging to them seemed to be slipping through their hands like water...nothing was left of the past or of the future and they had come to where they had nothing.”¹¹ The native Hawaiians cannot relate to such an experience, and are swiftly estranged from all they once knew. In a sense, the Hawaiians are lost, and the traditional “truths” they once knew—chanting, worshipping multiple gods, etc.—are all tested and the people themselves are thrust into a state of disarray.

Kayser’s third premise—as identified by Yates—is that the grotesque is a “play with the absurd.”¹² Like the grotesque, the absurd is another abstract concept that is not easily defined. Webster’s dictionary tells us the absurd could mean: “ridiculously unreasonable or unsound or incongruous, having no rational or orderly relationship to human life or pertaining to ‘absurdism’ a philosophical idea that purports the universe is irrational and meaningless and that the search for order brings the individual into conflict with the universe.”¹³ All three definitions relate to the human experience, but the first definition regarding logic seems the most pertinent in light of the grotesque and how we will use it. If we look for illogical occurrences, incongruities and ridiculous behaviors in Merwin’s piece we may find ourselves overwhelmed, given the somewhat subjective nature of interpreting what’s “ridiculous.” Indeed, some might say that colonizing or subjugating people is ridiculous while others might find it perfectly logical for an empire to seek fortunes and conquests. Likewise, while some might say fleeing into the mountains and engaging in armed conflict is illogical or ridiculous others might think it a noble act of heroism in the face of oppression. Acknowledging the subjective and relative nature of such a word, we can identify some instances of illogical or ridiculous events within “The Folding Cliffs” to further our pursuit of the grotesque. The earliest occurrence of illogical behavior comes in “The Mountain” after native women begin to pick up diseases from the explorers. The piece tells us “each visit seemed to leave new sickenings invisible spells against which they had no defences epidemics that overtook them...shakings aches and eruptions smells discharges.”¹⁴ Merwin later illustrates the women’s’ response: “still the people

flocked to the shore welcoming each visit.”¹⁵ At best, this behavior is naïve, and one might be inclined to consider the natives were naïve as to the cause of their suffering, failing to draw connections between the arrival of the strangers and the subsequent arrival of the disease. However, we are earlier told “the [native] people showed the strangers the sores and deformities on their persons urging the strangers to take away what they had brought.”¹⁶ This seems to show the native Hawaiians were aware of the fact that the strangers had brought these diseases, and yet they continued to trade, interact and lay with them. This, of course, is illogical and bizarre behavior on the part of the natives who seem consumed by both greed and intrigue. Such absurd behavior is not limited to the native Hawaiians however; indeed all people are capable of behaving illogically or at least in an incongruous manner. Colonizers, for their part, brought the sicknesses to the island, and then attempted to quarantine the natives, removing them from their own land and placing them within leper colonies. Human behavior is often odd and illogical, an idea which the grotesque seems to embody and Merwin seems to capture, but how does this relate to truth? If stories and accounts—such as the one Merwin based “The Folding Cliffs” on—are told by humans, and humans are apt to behave illogically, are humans capable of capturing and relaying truth?

The fourth and final premise Yates identifies in Kayser states that “the creation of the grotesque is an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world” is perhaps the most important and pertinent for our study of Merwin and of the grotesque within “The Folding Cliffs.”¹⁷ With this fourth premise, Kayser and Yates move away from the grotesque as a concept within literature, and identify it as a tool that can be utilized by authors and artists. Based on our knowledge of Merwin as an author and poet, we know that part of his agenda in writing “The Folding Cliffs” was to preserve and elevate Hawaiian culture, and probably raise awareness. Being descended from the Europeans who colonized the Americas and Hawaii, Merwin may have had some doubt or reticence in writing the story of Ko’olau and Pi’ilani, perhaps carrying shame, regret or resentment for his own heritage. In another sense, “The Folding Cliffs” may have been cathartic for Merwin. Whatever Merwin’s intentions in writing his piece, we can still see within the story an attempt to “invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world.”

Yates, in discussing the grotesque in the work of artist Francis Bacon, identifies many themes also present in “The Folding Cliffs.” In discussing humans and their world in Bacon’s work, Yates tells us:

...the relational world—the social world—is a destructive world. Bacon’s own radical existentialism brings us into the land of despair, for it is a vision that sees the truth of us all finally located in in our libidinal needs, our savage impulses, our survival instinct, our encounter with death, our propensity for evil that make up our individual selves”

and in terms of themes, Yates mentions,

...the use of color, light and darkness; the exaggerated expression of images that evoke horror, repulsion, fascination, denial...contributes to the power of the work to bounce off our nervous system more ‘poignantly and violently.’ The imagery of the grotesque becomes an imagery that moves us to the religious depths of ourselves.¹⁸

Merwin’s use of darkness, both literal and metaphorical is especially notable in comparison with Yates’ discussion of Bacon, as is his ability to evoke the same feelings outlined by Yates. By simply telling the story, Merwin invokes the suffering and distress of Pi’ilani, her family and people. To subdue these demons, Merwin shares his story with the masses, giving a voice to the suffering and allowing the memories to be carried on. Furthermore, the destructive nature of the “social world” is brought forth by Merwin, wherein all parties are implicated in the destruction and human evil. The native Hawaiian women with their “libidinal needs” help to introduce sickness to their people. Indeed, many individuals in “The Folding Cliffs” are fueled by their survival instinct and savage impulses, and all encounter death in one way or another.

I have illustrated and explored the presence of the grotesque within “The Folding Cliffs” through the four premises of Kayser identified by Yates, but what if we step away from Kayser’s premises for a moment and consider the grotesque in terms of one its earliest meanings, being caricature or surreal? Does such a concept resonate with Merwin’s piece? It seems Merwin avoided creating caricatures in his work; perhaps because he meant to convey a more humane and evocative story or perhaps he wanted to write a story distinctly unique from all others. Does his preservation of characters and realism make his piece any more truthful? To consider what Merwin’s piece may have looked like had he chosen to use caricatures, we can look to another author who wrote about the Battle of Kalalau utilizing grotesque caricatures. In the short story “Koolau the Leper,” author Jack London takes a very different approach from Merwin in describing the individuals afflicted

with leprosy. While Merwin does show the tragic demise and fading health of those with leprosy, his illumination of the disease's effects is largely limited to painful walking and open sores, excluding the more horrific aspects of the disease and leaving them to the imagination. London, conversely, illustrates them in a shocking and almost surreal fashion:

...their lips made uncouth noises and their throats rasped approval of Koolau's speech. They were creatures who once had been men and women. But they were men and women no longer. They were monsters—in face and form grotesque caricatures of everything human. They were hideously maimed and distorted, and had the seeming of creatures that had been racked in millenniums of hell. Their hands, when they possessed them, were like harpy claws. Their faces were the misfits and slips, crushed and bruised by some mad god at play in the machinery of life. Here and there were features which the mad god had smeared half away, and one woman wept scalding tears from twin pits of horror, where her eyes once had been. Some were in pain and groaned from their chests. Others coughed, making sounds like the tearing of tissue. Two were idiots, more like huge apes marred in the making, until even an ape were an angel.¹⁹

With its depictions of an eyeless woman crying and men “like huge apes,” this does indeed seem to be a caricature. London's use of such pitiful and harrowing imagery forces upon us the terrible reality and suffering of these people. While we are aghast, we are also filled with pity or sympathy for these so called “creatures.” Yates explores this attribute of the grotesque while discussing another artist and painting: “When we deal with Sequeiros' *Echo of a Scream*...we are dealing with a grotesque image of a human head fused to broken pieces of steel that shocks and disorients us...” he goes on to say: “[Sequeiros' work] engages us symbolically in the devastatingly brutal effect of war on innocent life.”²⁰ Given two very different descriptions of a historical event—being Koolau's life and the Battle of Kalalau—how do we discern truth from untruth and embellishment from realism? Is one author's retelling any more valid, truthful or accurate than the other? The answer seems to lie within the individual human mind and imagination. What one person perceives or collects, another does not. Each author seems to be “snatching up truths,” as the fable goes, thereby creating “grotesque” “falsehoods.”²¹ The stories of Merwin and London are each grotesque and to some degree or another lacking truth—either through taking artistic liberties

or withholding certain elements—but neither author seems to be attempting to lie or deceive; rather, each is presenting the truth as they perceive it. So, while Merwin's use of the grotesque might not match that of writer's such as Jack London, his exploration of the estranged world, impersonal forces and the mixed nature of human life illustrates his use of it.

Although Merwin chose not to use such shocking grotesque imagery as London, the two authors do have some commonality in their alternate use of the grotesque. As one author has pointed out, in Jack London's story the "...native Hawaiians become grotesque because of their race," made aliens by the white colonizers.²² The same could be said about the natives in Merwin's story as well, wherein people are made grotesque because of their race and affliction—an affliction they inherited from the colonizers.²³ In a sense, the grotesque and its distorted truths are very pervasive, able to penetrate our minds and perceptions, affecting the way we view and treat one another. Evidence seems to suggest that the grotesque and truth are intertwined and perhaps inseparable. The grotesque's "statement of the human truth is a necessary overstatement, in which reality as 'normally' experienced becomes both questionable and questioning."²⁴ In a sense, the truth is fleeting, and can never be fully pinned down or exposed. While there are indeed historical "facts" which occurred at The Battle of Kalalau, these facts were immediately nullified and garbled by the perceptions of those who engaged in, or witnessed the event and relayed their experiences to the media, historians and each other. Indeed, the truth has become distorted and therefore grotesque.

Poetry is an art, and art is "a source of revelation about the way we are. Art "provides us imprints of the truth which we need to know."²⁵ Truths are captured by Merwin and contained within "The Folding Cliffs," albeit distorted truths formulated by an individual imagination. Poetry, as well as the grotesque, "allows the writer to challenge any final or closed version of truth, to raise questions about what has been lost or omitted from a particular view of reality, and to explore the paradoxical, ambiguous, mixed nature of human life."²⁶ Furthermore, "the grotesque, while pointing to the limits of our creation, gives witness to our power to create new images and configurations that can mediate new understandings of the center."²⁷ The grotesque also "gives witness to the human capacity to create that which can break in on what is and provides clues for a new way of thinking and being. It becomes, therefore, a means through which we can see and respond to the world differently."²⁸ Merwin's imagination and compassion for the Hawaiian people coupled with his writing "from obligation" lent themselves to the creation of truth through the grotesque.²⁹ In a sense, that's precisely what

Merwin and other poets are, creators of distorted truth living in a distorted world. Like the work of other artists, Merwin's "The Folding Cliffs" is "a matter of historical perspective, not of historical truth."³⁰ To distinguish between the real and the imagined within "The Folding Cliffs" is to perhaps miss its point, and therefore, perhaps it's best to reconcile and explore it as a distorted and imagined realm contained within a grotesque world we can never fully understand.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Hix, H. L. *Understanding W.S. Merwin*. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 1997. Print. 15.
- ² Kayser, Wolfgang. *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*. Trans. Ulrich Weisstein. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1963. Print. 19.
- ³ Kayser, 19.
- ⁴ Kayser, 48-50; 168.
- ⁵ Adams, James Luther, Wilson Yates, and Robert Penn Warren. *The Grottesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997. Print. 52.
- ⁶ Adams et.al, 17.
- ⁷ Adams et.al, 17.
- ⁸ Adams et.al, 17.
- ⁹ Merwin, W. S. *The Folding Cliffs: A Narrative*. New York: Knopf, 1998. Print. 74.
- ¹⁰ Adams et al., 17.
- ¹¹ Merwin, 84.
- ¹² Adams et al., 17.
- ¹³ "Absurd." *Merriam-webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, n.d. Web. 17 Nov. 2012.
- ¹⁴ Merwin, 72.
- ¹⁵ Merwin, 72.
- ¹⁶ Merwin, 69.
- ¹⁷ Adams et al., 17.
- ¹⁸ Adams et al. 190.
- ¹⁹ London, Jack. "Koolau the Leper." *The Literature Network*. Jalic Inc., n.d. Web. 09 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.online-literature.com/poe/72>>.
- ²⁰ Adams et al., 42.
- ²¹ Adams et al., 246.
- ²² Meyer, Michael Jon. *Literature and the Grottesque*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995. Print. 120.
- ²³ Merwin, 56; 66.
- ²⁴ Adams et al., 78.
- ²⁵ Adams et al., 160.
- ²⁶ Adams et al., 230.
- ²⁷ Adams et al., 54.
- ²⁸ Adams et al., 54.
- ²⁹ Hix, 15.
- ³⁰ Adams et al., 117.