

Unreliable Narration through Representations of the Grotesque in Lagerkvist's *The Dwarf*

Nitya Morales Vázquez  
*University of Puerto Rico*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

### Recommended Citation

Morales Vázquez, Nitya. "Unreliable Narration through Representations of the Grotesque in Lagerkvist's *The Dwarf*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 9.4 (2007): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1302>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1302)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 9 Issue 4 (December 2007) Article 5**

**Nitya Morales Vázquez,**

**"Unreliable Narration through Representations of the Grotesque in Lagerkvist's *The Dwarf*"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss4/5>>

---

**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 9.4 (2007)**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss4/>>

---

**Abstract:** Nitya Morales Vázquez, in her paper "Unreliable Narration through Representations of the Grotesque in Lagerkvist's *The Dwarf*," begins with the hypothesis that most direct expression of ideology in discourse is found in the semantics of discourse. In literature, one can analyze this ideology by examining whether the narration is reliable or whether it is unreliable. Based on these presuppositions, Morales Vázquez analyses discourse in Pär Fabian Lagerkvist's novel, *The Dwarf*. Morales Vázquez argues that through the use of the conceptual frames of characterization, voice, and focalization the dwarf's character offers an unreliable narration. Through representations present in the novel, Morales Vázquez studies the grotesque in relation to the dwarf's character and their correlation to ideology. Thus, the grotesque is defined as an unresolved clash of incompatibles manifested incongruously as a distortion of the natural into absurdity, ugliness, or caricature which in turn provokes the observer into an "emotional disorientation" that may be used to question the signification of its ambiguous quality. It is because the grotesque is a powerful esthetic category involving the disruption and distortion of hierarchical or canonical assumptions with an emphasis on the modes of excess and transgression in speech, style, and in the literary representation of the body that religion has been inserted. The dwarf's marginality and perversity is a signifier on the accelerating distance between man and God; as the "other," a flawed being, a scapegoat, the enemy, the unknown, and the damned.

**Nitya MORALES VÁZQUEZ****Unreliable Narration through Representations of the Grotesque in Lagerkvist's *The Dwarf***

Representations are constructed images that are expressed by means of a figure or a symbol. *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* defines representation primarily as "presence" or "appearance" (<[http://www.askoxford.com/concise\\_oed/orexxpresentation?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/orexxpresentation?view=uk)>). The associated visual components of these primary definitions highlight how the image may be perceived. Yet, by considering the "appearance" of these constructions with our own senses, one must, not only perceive the signs, but also interpret them. In fiction, the construction of a narrative representation should be considered as the result of the readers' interpretive strategies, for in this intervention one can distinguish if the portrayal is accurate. Because representations also have political connotations (i.e., to "represent," serve in a legislative body by delegated authority usually resulting from elections, and can be used in discourse in order to influence opinion or action, they expose concepts about human life and culture that have great significance in communicating ideological content). The most direct expression of ideology in discourse is found in the semantics of discourse. In literature, the analysis of this ideology is done by examining whether or not the narration is reliable: "Unreliable *narration* allows for a better understanding of the ways in which literature mediates between the real and the imaginary, between cultural discourses and the represented imaginative world" (Zerweck 169).

Wayne C. Booth offers a definition that is fundamental to understanding unreliable narration: "I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work ... unreliable when he does not" (158-59). It is important to note, however, that Booth has offered a reader-centered approach to unreliable narration where the reader's moral and intellectual judgment can be put into practice. The device that may prove useful in determining ideologies are modalities, the grammar of explicit comment. Modalities expose the ideological point of view by providing the means by which people express their degree of commitment to the truth of the propositions they utter. In the text, a narrator or a character may directly indicate his/her judgments or beliefs by the use of a variety of modal structures. Based on these assumptions, I analyze the representation of discourse in Pär Fabian Lagerkvist's novel, *The Dwarf*. I argue that through the use of the conceptual frames of characterization, voice, and focalization the dwarf's character offers an unreliable narration. Through the representations present in the novel, I focus on the grotesque in relation to the dwarf's character and their correlation to ideology. In particular, this novel finds its expression in the grotesque; a notion that combines ugliness and ornament, the bizarre and the ridiculous, the excessive and the unreal. The term offers various definitions, but among them, the most significant definitions of the grotesque are: 1) Etymologically, stemming from its Old-Italian root (*pittura*) *grottesca*, literally, cave painting, the feminine form of *grottesco* of a cave, from *grotta*; a style of decorative art characterized by fanciful or fantastic human and animal forms often interwoven with foliage or similar figures that may distort the natural into absurdity, ugliness, or caricature (see *Merriam-Webster* <<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/grotesque>>); 2) Something absurdly incongruous; departing markedly from the natural, the expected, or the typical. This results in leaving the observer in an intermediate state, in uncertainty, in a state of indecision. The observer is left with a sense of "emotional disorientation" which in turn emphasizes the grotesque's ambiguous quality. Here we are dealing in its bizarre quality which can extend to physical attributes or any other element (see Webster's <<http://www.cs.chalmers.se/~hallgren/wget.cgi?grotesque>>); and 3) An unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response (Thomson 27). The most consistently distinguished characteristic of the grotesque has been the fundamental element of disharmony, whether this is referred to as conflict, clash, mixture of the heterogeneous, or conflation of disparates. It is important that this disharmony has been seen, not merely in the work of art as such, but also in the reaction it produces and (speculatively) in the creative temperament and psychological make-up of the artist. (Thomson 20); and 4) The managing of the uncanny by the comic (Steig 259).

Based on the above definitions, I define the grotesque as an unresolved clash of incompatibles that are manifested incongruously as a distortion of the natural into absurdity, ugliness, or caricature which in turn provokes the observer into an "emotional disorientation" that may be used to question the signification of its ambiguous quality. This definition is merged with one of Wolfgang Kayser's concepts offering a roundness and contextualization to the purpose of its study: "The grotesque world is - and is not -- our own world. The ambiguous way in which we are affected by it results from our awareness that the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the impact of abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence" (Kaiser <<http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/ej/2a2.html>>). In this respect, the grotesque as a reflection of our own world includes an analysis of religion as one of its main themes. It is because the grotesque is a powerful esthetic category involving the disruption and distortion of hierarchical or canonical assumptions with an emphasis on the modes of excess and transgression in speech, style, and in the literary representation of the body that religion has been inserted. The dwarf (as a prevalent theme of the grotesque) is prodded deeper as a transgressed boundary, which by uniting dualities in the same frame, seek to question our notion of religion as an organized set of beliefs. The dwarf's marginality and perversity is a signifier on the accelerating distance between man and God; as the "other," a flawed being, a scapegoat, the enemy, the unknown, and the damned. This being which stands on the borders of propriety and deviance, self-control, and repressed desire questions the meaning of religion and ethics while hinting at a deeper truth found in the nature of humanity.

My interest is the study of the character of the dwarf as a manifestation of grotesque incongruity and deviant behavior. Emphasizing on his questionable character I study the disparity between the dwarf's alleged internal beliefs and his external actions. Textual inconsistencies and contradictions supply additional support in order to prove that the dwarf's first-person narrative is unreliable. Considering unreliable narration as a phenomenon on the borderline between ethics and aesthetics, between literary and other cultural discourses I employ the grotesque to highlight ironical conflicts between the relationships of power, desire, class, and religion present in the text. In the search of criteria which suggest that the narration is unreliable, I concentrate on the narrator's justifications, his rationalizations, and what he conveys when he announces openly his deeds and motivations. Here, the notion of focalization drawn by Gérard Genette is also introduced. Focalized through the dwarf's character the events are related in the narrative are presented through his eyes. I also employ the analysis of modalities following Roger Fowler's description of modalities: "Modality is the grammar of explicit comment, the means by which people express their degree of commitment to the truth of the propositions they utter, and their views on the desirability or otherwise of the states of affairs referred to" (166-67) and thus I am able to determine the dwarf's point of view. Further, I also apply Boris Uspensky's *verba sentiendi* (words denoting feelings, thoughts, and perceptions; see Uspensky; see also Fowler) for the evaluation of the first-person subjective perspective. Through the use of signs I study its dennotive and connotive qualities which are inherent in the human cognitive process. Thus, the sense of the sign is contextualized within the culture which produced it reflecting the moral or ethical implications inherent in such a society (e.g., an Italian court in the Renaissance). These notions are used to analyze the dwarf in view of its character representation as a reflection of the pervading animating principle of the human nature. Bruno Zerweck states that "narratology has developed a number of reader-centered and cognitive models that focus on the reading process and the interpretation of texts and rely on cognitive parameters" (Zerweck 152). Lagerkvist has arranged in his work the structure of the processes, participants, and circumstances which motivate the dwarf in such a way that the rich composition of characterization and the issues that surround it can be subjected to profound psychological studies. Characterization defines -- broadly speaking -- the description and development of characters: "Character is thus produced as a complex effect on the layering of levels of language and representation; and an adequate conceptualization of it might require a similar dialectical layering of textual and mimetic theories" (Frow 246).

The objective of my investigation is to prove that Lagerkvist's dwarf is an unreliable narrator by exposing the textual inconsistencies found within his first-person narrative perspective. Some of these inconsistencies have been described as: "paratextual elements, conflicts between story and discourse, internal discrepancies within the narrator's discourse, discrepancies between the narrator's presentation of events and his or her commentary on these events, multiperspectival accounts of the story that cannot be synthesized, and the narrator's explicit or implicit disclosure of his or her own unreliability" (Zerweck 154). Further, "Behavior and action in the novel exemplify moral and psychological qualities which is then the reader's task to retrieve" (Frow 236). Thus, I analyze character in three ways: its integration with its type, its relation to a series of modalities, and the corpus of qualities and thematic "roles" which it supports. Since the novel is narrated through the sole viewpoint of the dwarf, in his interpretative descriptions he expresses ideological and psychological planes of point of view. Ideology as the system of beliefs, values, and categories by reference to which a person or a society comprehends the world is represented in the novel by the focalization of the dwarf. I use the term "focalization" which was first proposed by Genette to describe the phenomenon more generally known as "point of view" in fiction. It refers to the perceptual, emotional, and ideological perspective through which narrated events are presented. The dwarf is a focalizer for he is the agent whose point of view orients the narrative text. Since the presentation of narrative facts and events are coming solely from the constant point of view of the dwarf, this pattern of focalization is defined as "fixed focalization." This also points to an internal focalization, where the narrator's information is subjected to what a given character knows. This means that focalization, as a means of selecting and restricting narrative information, creates a narrator's viewpoint, which may be empathetical or ironical and this in turn works together dynamically with the reader's interpretative strategies.

Unreliable narration can be recognized by both the textual signs and the contextual clues which show either internal contradictions with the text's and the reader's norms. When the system of values becomes problematic or questionable (especially concerning moral issues) and there is subjectivity within the narrator's discourse we are confronted with a narration that is unreliable. Presently, I will prove how in various instances the dwarf shows that his narration is unreliable. It is striking to see that unreliable narration is also expressed overtly from the way the dwarf narrates. In his narration, he uses explicit comment and shows awareness of engaging in the act of narration. First of all, the dwarf offers a description of how he gathers information and arrives at his possible conclusion: "I do not know for certain that that is the plan, but I have picked up bits here and there and come to that conclusion. I am busy finding out everything, keeping up with everything, listening at keyholes, hiding behind cupboards and curtains to hear as much as possible of the great impending events" (70). The sources of evidence the dwarf uses to back up what he seems to know are inconsistent. Picking up bits of information from here and there creates a collected account from different sources, which give the sensation of having a fragmented account, organized as a "collage." He keeps up with the information by eavesdropping, listening at keyholes, or hiding behind cupboards and curtains, places that are not direct but, rather, at a distance. Not only is the dwarf removed from the sound, but also from having direct access to it by objects that may muffle it. By analysing the modal adverb he uses, "uncertainty," we see that his knowledge of the plan reflects his sources, which are uncertain and indirectly second-handed. When analysing how the dwarf can rely on information that he hears at a distance, we see in another instance when the dwarf is eavesdropping in a conversation, that his capability is exaggerated: "I felt my way up to her door and listened outside it ... They spoke in whispers, but my keen ears heard everything" (181). Not only was he able to hear a conversation that is being whispered, but he was able to understand the whispering through the door. This in itself is impressive, but that he is able to hear everything they say is highly unlikely. Later on in the text, the dwarf narrates the conversation that he had allegedly heard word for word. The unreliability mentioned previously may create very strong reservations in believing that account. The dwarf also tries to give accounts of things that he cannot really describe: "I shall try to give a detailed and authentic description of the great in-

comparable battle" (79). The connotation in the modal auxiliary, "try," shows that the dwarf is not entirely confident in the result of his description. Additionally, he wants to give a detailed and authentic description of something that is incomparable and this may indicate some unreliability in his account. Another similar instance occurs later on by using the adjective indescribable to describe a scene: "It was indescribably nasty" (95). Following this comment there is a rather precise and detailed account which contradicts the use of the attribute indescribable. This cannot be regarded as a reliable narration because either his accounts of the events are not absolutely true or his claims of the impossibility of description are the ones that lack consistency. In many of his descriptions what seems to be a fact, is later overridden by his point of view, or opinion: "Victory was within reach, or so it appeared to me" (79).

Focalization is a visual metaphor that utilizes the dwarf's thoughts and perceptions. Here, the text is anchored on a dwarf's point of view because it presents (and does not transcend) his own perspective. "Appearance" is a verb of evaluation which emphasizes the visual quality that orients what the dwarf is narrating. This type of narration not only highlights the dwarf's subjective point of view but it also indicates that many of his conclusions are influenced by circumstance and impressions that may be short lived. Moreover, he is not definite in his conclusions. Another textual sign that presents a problematic thought pattern is found in the discrepant assumptions found in the dwarf's narration. These assumptions are multiple and (as this example shows) usually expose presupposition that may be misleading: "I know him better than anyone else; he is not like that" (100). In this case, the dwarf is assuming too much about the Prince's character, by stating he knows him better than anyone else, a fact which is an exaggeration. This assertion will later emphasize the lack of knowledge the dwarf has of the Prince's behaviour for what he characterizes as knowledge is not in fact gained from experience but from his own subjective thoughts and fantasies. The dwarf's mistakes in identifying knowledge in equal terms as imaginings reveal his lack of judgment and the consequent distortion of reality. Later, the surprise he experiences when confronted with the real situation demonstrates further that his misleading account is due to the fantastic mental image he has of the Prince: "I was so amazed at the Prince's behavior with the prostitute that night, for I had always held him to be above such things; not that it has anything to do with me, I am accustomed to his sudden transformations into someone quite different from what I had imagined. I mentioned it tactfully to a cameriere the next day, expressing my astonishment over what had happened, but he did not share my feelings. He said that the Prince always had mistresses, ladies of the court or the town, sometimes famous courtesans; just at present he favored the Princess' damigella, Fiammetta. He likes variety, explained the cameriere, laughing at me because I did not know it" (102). This excerpt is a clear example of the dwarf's ignorance and the shock that causes its revelation. Not only is he not aware that this has been happening, but in contrast it is common knowledge at the court. "The mechanisms behind the narrator's self-incrimination can be explained by recourse to dramatic irony, which ... 'involves a contrast between a narrator's view of the fictional world and the contrary state of affairs which the reader can grasp. ... Without being aware of it, unreliable narrators continually give the reader indirect information about their idiosyncrasies and state of mind'" (Zerweck 156). When analyzing the relationship of the dwarf with the Prince it one must be aware that the knowledge the dwarf has of his ruler is not complete but rather astonishingly lacking. It is revealing to view, the complex and contradictory opinion the dwarf has towards his ruler as pivotal feature of his unreliability, via his unintentional self-incrimination.

The dwarf also reveals his opinion of the Prince by emitting some propositions known as generic sentences (which claim universal truths) about the relationship between the dwarf and his master. These statements invert the relationship between the dwarf and the master by ironically placing the dwarf in a position of more authority. Not only is the dwarf presented as being more intelligent than his master, but he is also shown as being essential: "A dwarf always knows more about everything than his master"(17) and "One always needs the service of one's dwarf" (182). Considering that originally the word dwarf is related to smallness rather than this grandeur, the dwarf attributing himself

the irony becomes especially exacerbated when the master is delegated to a needful position, placing the master in the position of slave (here, the specific definition that is used of the word slave is a person who is excessively dependent upon something, in this sense the slave of the dwarf). Also, if the dwarf knows more about everything than his master, this statement also implies that the dwarf also knows more about ruling than the Prince himself. Delving deeper into the opinion the dwarf has towards his own master, the Prince, we can see how the Prince is described in different ways: "I have never denied that he is a great prince" (16); "It fills me with pride to be the dwarf of such a prince" (70); and "I have said before that my contempt for him knows no bounds" (130). The dwarf's changing views on the Prince reveal contradictory thoughts and "rollercoaster" feelings that accentuate internal contradictions within the narrator's discourse. He shifts from opposite poles, seems to show both affection and disdain for the Prince. Not only does the dwarf express contradiction in his various portrayals of the Prince, but also when narrating other people's thoughts about the Prince. This creates conflict between the story and discourse because the narrator's explanation of events is a cause for uncertainty. At first the Prince is portrayed as being a popular character among the people, arising triumphant from the murders of his enemies and helping to establish peace: "The murders have made the Prince very popular. Everybody says that he is a great prince. Never before has he triumphed so over his enemies and been the object of such admiration. We are proud of him and consider that he has shown unusual cunning and energy ... The majority are delighted and cheer whenever he shows himself...Now the people await a really peaceful and happy era" (161). Suddenly the Prince is revealed in a different light, quite opposite from what he was considered before: "The Prince has awakened and has begun to assume the leadership of the defense. He is unpopular and meets with no applause when he shows himself. Folk think that the murder of Montanza and his people was the act of a lunatic and can lead to nothing but more war and misery" (168).

The change in persona is quite astounding. Not only do the people think differently, but they also act accordingly. In the first excerpt the people cheer for the Prince while later he meets with no applause or recognition. In one case his actions promote peace, while on the other hand, they are the cause for more war. When the dwarf narrates this episode, his account becomes improbable for they have occurred in a very short amount of time and are completely opposed to one another. The dwarf's unreliability is also shown with the thoughts the dwarf has regarding the stars and predictions. He gives an unreliable account to what stars mean, which also conforms to an opinion the dwarf has towards human nature. To the dwarf, the task of the astrologers at the court, is especially challenging, for they must read the stars in accordance to men's preferences. The irony of no longer reading the stars, but of interpreting them at the conformity of men's wishes lies in that the meaning of the stars no longer influences human affairs, but rather human affairs influence the meaning of the stars: "It is not easy to read the stars, and to read them so that men are pleased with what is written there" (179). At first he shows that the stars are something that one cannot understand, that their meaning is unfathomable, and that men who try to understand them are doing so in vain. He makes a comparison of the starry heavens, as a copied book with mysterious contents. The dwarf says that although he reads the "book of the night" he understands that he cannot interpret it. This lack of understanding is, in a way, a source of understanding for him: "Who knows anything about the stars? Who can read their secret? Can these men? They believe that they can commune with the universe, and rejoice when they receive sapient replies. They spread out their star-maps and read the heavens like a book. But they are the authors of the book, and the stars continue on their shadowy ways and have no inkling of its contents. I too read in the book of the night, but I cannot interpret it. My wisdom shows me not only the writing, but also that it cannot be interpreted" (14). It is interesting how the dwarf uses the word "interpreted," for this is exactly what the dwarf does, offering his own interpretation. The explanation the dwarf gives for not being able to interpret the book of night is that it cannot be interpreted. Yet he has done exactly the opposite, for he has also interpreted the writing by understanding in his wisdom (which indicates that he has used his reasoning skill to interpret it), that it is, un-

interpretable. A great contradiction is found when the dwarf says he has a deep gaze that permits him to read the 'book of the night', and in another moment he says he was never able to do this: "I sit at the dwarf's window and gaze out into the night, exploring it as they do. I need no tubes nor telescopes, for my gaze itself is deep enough. I too read in the book of the night" (15) and "It is strange that I who can see the fires which are so far away, cannot perceive the stars. I have never been able to. My eyes are not like others' but there is nothing the matter with them, for I can distinguish everything on earth very quickly" (167). There is an internal contradiction in the dwarf's narration from being able to see the stars without tubes or telescopes and afterwards arguing that he was never able to do this. Although his reasons in changing his versions are not explicit, these extreme opposite changes enforce the notion that this narrator cannot be trusted. Yet, these interpretations made by the dwarf about reading the stars and his comments upon it (especially the repeated mentioning of the phrase "I too read in the book of the night") seem to point to a larger, darker message.

One of the tools used to uncover if the narrator has a problematic value scheme is by viewing his self-portrayal and if these are similar to other descriptions we have of him. The dwarf's self-portrayal is significant, for his own views come into conflict with diverging assessments from other characters. Although there is evidence that points to the traditional conceptions of the dwarf in the court, being not only a partner to the Prince but also a trickster or joker figure, the dwarf separates himself from those concepts and makes very clear that although he is a dwarf, he is not a buffoon: "Most dwarfs are buffoons, I am no buffoon" (5). Yet this is in conflict with how other people view him: "On the other hand I have a sharp tongue which may occasionally give pleasure to some of those around me. That is not the same thing as being their buffoon" (6). To make the distinction of not being a buffoon and yet sharing qualities of a buffoon is very tricky. He does not regard himself as a buffoon but when he speaks it is enjoyable to those who are around him. That is exactly the main function of a buffoon, to make jokes and comments that entertain because of their pleasurable content. There is a contradiction in how the dwarf views himself, and how he is viewed because he has a very different perception of himself. Actually, he feels he is assuming a much more respectable position: "I am part of him and occasionally represent his noble person ... I dress myself as much as possible like the Prince, the same cut and the same materials" (17). Such a distortion of thought (believing himself to hold a noble rank) contrasts starkly with the reality -- the dwarf is only a parody of the etiquette with which the royalty had to conform. On the other hand, although he shows a certain type of pride, when an artist notices him he seems to devalue himself: "But then to him everything is extraordinary: a freak of nature like myself, or one of his wonderful stones which are so rare that he picks them up from the ground to admire them" (50). The evaluative adjective he uses on himself is very informative, the words *freak of nature* emphasizes his grotesque attributes, which are recognized by himself and it can provide an insight to the reason he hates himself and dwarfs in general: "It is my fate that I hate my own people. My race is detestable to me. But I hate myself too. I eat my own splenetic flesh. I drink my own poisoned blood" (28). This parallel to Christ's communion is rich in symbolisms. While Christ offered his blood and flesh as the ultimate act of love towards humanity, the dwarf engages in cannibalism (by eating his own flesh and blood) as an act of hate towards himself and his race. It is this mix of self loathing and self exaltation that makes the dwarf's narration so impressive. Throughout the novel the dwarf is trying to uncover the truth about human nature, yet never answers it -- within his limited first-person narrative. It is for that reason that when viewing humans as a whole, the dwarf demonstrates his misgivings towards superior people. In the case of the artist, Maestro Bernardo, the dwarf assumes an ironical portrayal. The Maestro, being highly regarded by others in the novel is brought into strict scrutiny from the dwarf who wonders: "In what way is he misshapen, I wonder?" (32). It is ironical for him to employ the word "misshapen" for it echoes in himself, as a dwarfed human. Yet when he speaks about misshapen he does not mean physically, but, rather, spiritually or internally. The dwarf assumes that everybody is misshapen in some way.

There are two compelling instances in the novel where the dwarf clashes with the Prince and the



Princess in revealing ways. Both instances have to do with the notion of justice and its ethical or religious appeal. Let us examine the case of the Princess. The Princess, full of grief because of her lover's death, has decided to stay in her room and leave a rather austere life, praying and fasting to a severe degree. The dwarf visits her on occasion, to perform the role of a confessor. In one of the visits, when the dwarf finds her praying, he takes the voice of God into himself and exclaims to her: "Why are you praying? Have I not told you that you may not pray? That I do not want your prayers?" (206). After he reproaches and tells her that God hates her, she whimpers for him to punish her, calling him the scourge of God. He takes the scourge she hands to him and as he hits her repeatedly he says: "I have suffered for you, but you have never cared about that! Now you shall know what it feels like to suffer!" I was beside myself, I scarcely knew what I was doing. Knew? Of course I knew! I was taking revenge, retribution for everything! I was dispensing justice!" (208). At first he says that he did not know what he was doing, but immediately he corrects what he has just said and says that he knew exactly what he was doing. To him, it was dispensing justice, and justice to him meant taking revenge. Retribution, not for the sins she may have done, but the word everything highlights that it is, rather, for everything he has suffered. Subverting religious notions to his advantage, and confusing the concepts revenge/justice, the dwarf has become a judge. After the flogging, the Princess is found dead and is later regarded as a saint. When the dwarf talks about how she has come to be considered in such a way, he includes an example of her situation with that of Jesus. When the dwarf does this, he paraphrases and alters the meaning of Christ's passion to such a degree that he offers a negative context in which to place the Princess's situation: "And her penances and scourgings, which the tiring wench had had time to relate to all and sundry, transformed her into one of the elect who, being an exalted personage despite her humiliation, had suffered more than all the others. Inasmuch as He was God's son, Jesus too suffered more than anybody else even though many others have been crucified, some head downward, and had been killed and martyred far more painfully than He. By degrees she became a saintly being who had despised and denied this life to such an extent that she had tortured her body to death of her own accord.... Lies are far rarer and more impressive than the truth, and so they prefer them" (221-22). The way he exemplifies the Princess torturous last days and compares it with the story of the passion of Christ exalts how Jesus's good deeds are demeaned when compared to other men who have suffered more than him. The implications are serious. There is a contradiction when at first he ascertains that Jesus suffered more than anyone else for immediately after that he says that many other people have been in a position where they have suffered more pain. In the end he talks about how lies are more impressive than the truth, implying that the position of Christ as the supreme sufferer is a lie, as is the position of the Princess who is now described as having also suffered more than all others.

Lies also appear in the incident with the Prince, for after an incident where the guests of the Prince (which are also his enemies) have been poisoned. Although it is the dwarf the one who has caused this, it is the Prince who asked him to do it: "The Prince has confided in me -- something so glorious that it makes the brain reel: I cannot breathe a word about it; it is a secret between the two of us. Never before have I realized how closely we are bound together. All I can say is that I am tremendously happy" (130). When the dwarf describes his emotional and mental state by using the *verba sentiendi* he denotes both his involvement and thoughts about the situation. The brain "reeling" is a strong display of emotion and compulsive thought towards a matter that points to a subject that is of much interest to the dwarf. When the dwarf tells about how closely he is bound to the Prince, the importance of the Prince's message is apparent. His happiness is not because of the deed asked of him, but rather because of his newfound union with the Prince. Yet after the deed is done the Prince displays aversion to the dwarf: "He avoids me. He always does that after that kind of thing" (160). This denotes that similar things have been happening before. The Prince has needed before the help of the dwarfs to impart his own "justice" to his enemies. Later, the dwarf justifies his position, showing how his opinion differs with that of the Prince: "It is true that I mixed poison, but on whose orders? It is

true that I was the death of Don Riccardo, but who was it wished his death? It is true I scourge the Princess, but who begged and prayed me to do so? Human beings are too feeble and exalted to shape their own destiny" (216). Thus, both the Prince and the Princess use the dwarf sometimes as a scapegoat to help them achieve their desires, when they seem not to be able to do it themselves. He is the monster within, which inhabits the castle. But while he is more obviously outwardly misshapen, the Prince and the Princess are internally misshapen. His argument justifies his position and displaces the guilt unto the Prince and Princess, which are the true culprits of the acts, by being responsible for them.

Each of the religious instances in Lagerkvist's *The Dwarf* provokes an "emotional disorientation" which is a main characteristic used in my definition of the grotesque. Here, the grotesque is used as a technique for reflection and its reaction prompts the reader to question traditional religious assumptions. As the dwarf inhabits the space of transgressions we can see through his eyes the flaws and imperfections inherent in the Prince and Princess. Meanwhile, the Prince and Princess only become aware of the ethical aspect of religion through the dwarf's actions. The dwarf's narration when related to religion is markedly portrayed as being grotesque. The dwarf regards his "immersion" into the catholic faith as authentic, when in reality it is a farce created to amuse: "I understand that, for I am Christian myself; I have been baptized into the same faith as they, and it is a valid baptism, though it was done as a joke at the wedding of Duke Gonzaga and Donna Elena, when I was carried into the castle chapel as their first born, to whom the bride had given birth on the wedding day to the astonishment of all present. I have often heard it related as a very good joke, and I remember that so it was, for I was eighteen years old when it happened, and the Prince had lent me for the ceremony" (13). Later on, when the dwarf ponders about religion, he recalls an incident where a religious act was being represented. The resulting effect is a grotesque blasphemy where religion is adapted to fit a dwarf celebration: "What is religion? ... I pondered it especially that time a few years ago when I was compelled to officiate as a bishop in full canonicals at the carnival and give holy communion to the dwarfs of the Mantua court whom their Prince had brought here for the festival" (26). The dwarf's words in the carnival distort the reality of Jesus's physique to the dwarf's minuscule proportions. The distortion is presented in the form of a twisted account which converts traditional religious ceremony into a parody: "'Here is your savior,' I declared in a sonorous voice, my eyes flaming with passion. 'Here is the savior of all the dwarfs, himself a dwarf, who suffered under the great prince Pontius Pilate, and was nailed to his little toy cross for the joy and ease of all men'"(26). What is grotesque in this depiction is the conversion of Jesus Christ into a dwarfed being. I defined earlier grotesque as an unresolved clash of incompatibles that are incongruously manifested as the distortion of the natural into absurdity, ugliness, or caricature which in turn provokes the observer into an "emotional disorientation" that may be used to question the signification of its ambiguous quality, and in this sense religion is caricatured and presented as an amusement, as a game which includes toy crosses. "Emotional disorientation" is elevated when one is confronted with a terrible suffering which is for the joy and ease of all men. Ideologically, the dwarf reveals that in his opinion, the crucifixion of Christ brings joy and ease to all men. It is as if our sins make us misshapen and we rejoice in not confronting this reality as part of our human nature. It seems that Lagerkvist has difficulty reconciling religion (Catholicism) with human nature.

Furthermore, he adds, when he speaks of the holy mysteries: "I eat his body which was deformed like yours. It tastes bitter as gall, for it is full of hatred. May you all eat of it. I drink his blood, and it burns like a fire which cannot be quenched. It is as though I drink my own" (26). Christ's body as being deformed does not conform to a standard of perfection that being the Son of God should entail. That later the dwarf says that the body he consumes is full of hatred is a way for his own hatred of humanity to channel. More so, for him the blood he drinks is as if it were his own. This analogy of Jesus and the dwarf extends further, and their lives are compared: "At that time it was still in its initial stages, but it seemed to represent the Last Supper, with Christ and His disciples at their love feast ... I

rejoiced to think that soon He would be taken, that Judas, sitting huddled in his far corner, would soon betray Him ... Soon He will no longer be sitting there with His followers, but hanging alone on a cross, betrayed by them. He will hang there as naked as I am now, as humiliated as I, exposed to the stares of all, mocked and defiled. And why not? Why should He not suffer the same ignominy as I? He has always been encompassed with love, nourished Himself on love- while I have been nourished on hate. From my birth I tasted the bitter juice of hate, I have lain at a breast filled with gall, while He was suckled by the mild and gracious Madonna and drank the sweetest mother's milk that ever was" (46-47). Here, the dualities between the dwarf and Christ -- love/hate, lain/suckled, breast filled with gall/sweetest mother's milk -- reveal the dwarf's emotional involvement, which increases powerfully when talking about his own personal experience with his mother. The dwarf was hated from birth, and if he was breast-fed it was with gall, which indicates that his own bitterness and cruelty stem from how he was treated. In contrast, the dwarf uses delicate words to describe Christ's loving care from birth which explains why he wants Christ to suffer as himself, for in jealousy he exclaimed before: "and why not?" Although the dwarf displays dissatisfaction for how he has been brought up, since he is in such a position of utter hate, he wants Christ to suffer also. During the poison incident we see how that hate encompasses not only himself and Christ, but also the enemies which surround him.

I mentioned previously that the dwarf received news from the Prince that he must poison his enemies. During and after the enemies have been poisoned, the dwarf says he feels like Satan. What is intriguing is the grotesque inversion the dwarf makes of Jesus and his Last Supper, and the parallels he draws from both incidents: "I offer my potion and the guests at the lavish tables grow pale and their smiles fade and none raises his glass again or prates of love and the joy of living. For after my drink they forget all the beauty and wonder of life and a mist enfolds everything and their eyes fail and darkness falls. I turn down their torches and extinguish them so that it is dark. I assemble them with their unseeing eyes at my somber communion feast where they have drunk my poisoned blood, that which my heart drinks daily, but which for them spells death" (153-54). The dwarf's somber communion feast is different from that of Jesus. Instead of bringing light - related to the Christian doctrine, "I am the Light" and "I am the Way", the dwarf's doctrine is darkness. What the dwarf offers is not life (which is what Jesus offers), but death. This inversion of roles is especially determinant in defining his "religious" ideology, for his reaction after he has killed many men is "Brotherly love. Eternal peace" (156). In this reading experience there may be identification with the dwarf's views or complete opposition, because the tension between the grotesque and the normal religious or ethical systems are subverted. Yet the dwarf, by inhabiting a transgressed boundary represents our other, the frighteningly distorted mirror aspect of ourselves: "I have noticed that sometimes I frighten people; what they really fear is themselves. They think it is I who scare them, but it is the dwarf within them ... They are afraid because they do not know that they have another being inside them. They are scared when anything rises to the surface, from their inside, out of some of the cesspools in their souls, something which they do not recognize and which is not part of their real life ... And they are deformed though it does not show on the outside. I live only my dwarf life" (29-30). The deformations we have inside us are what make us beings that are misshapen. We are used to living this double life, one of appearance and lies. By separating our life by dualities, we confront the dwarf, a figure rooted in ambiguity and we must suspend and reflect upon his signifying potentiality. At the end of the novel, there are two paintings of the Princess. In one of them she is depicted as a whore and in the other one she is portrayed as a saint: "And yet both pictures, despite their great dissimilarity, may speak the truth in its own way; both show the same vague smile, which the worshipers in the cathedral think so heavenly" (225). The representations of whore/saint signify the possibility of maintaining a unified ideological essence, among so much dissimilarity. Perhaps the "truth" hinted at is that human nature is the union of our good and bad (misshapen) qualities, or maybe that there is an equal truth notwithstanding whether one is a sinner or a saint.

Throughout the novel, Lagerkvist builds around a simple narrative one of the most greatest and

complex mysteries of human existence, being a master at that. For the purposes of this paper, I delimit my argument to proving that *The Dwarf* is an example of unreliable narration. In *The Dwarf*, the reader is allowed to interpret the narrator's points of view and assess whether the narration is reliable or not. The narrative representation is subject to the dwarf's various moods and how his statements, internal beliefs, and external actions demonstrate the unreliability of his narration. Considering the title and the character itself, a dwarf, a grotesque picture of distorted proportions, physique, and mentality allows the reader to become aware of the conflicting narration he/she is to experience. The reader is presented with perceptions alien to oneself. As the reader gets acquainted with the character, the dwarf's judgments and beliefs, as well as his actions, demonstrate their unreliable quality. The grotesque incongruity and deviant behaviour manifests itself throughout the narration in relation to various other characters, various circumstances, and in relation to various themes. His own self-esteem or lack thereof is presented in the various passages in which he makes statements about dwarfs, or talks specifically about himself. But, is he really talking about himself? The dwarf causes an "emotional disorientation" by defamiliarizing the common events that take place in the court and distorting them into significant forms which must be questioned. In Lagerkvist's novel, the dwarf is finally locked inside the castle -- not completely destroyed, but hidden. As readers one is forced to think that if we as human beings like to see ourselves in clouded mirrors -- because we really do not want to see our true reflection -- one in which a wrathful dwarf is staring back at us.

#### Works Cited

- Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1983.  
*Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (2007): <[http://www.askoxford.com/concise\\_oed/orexxpresentation?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/orexxpresentation?view=uk)>.
- Fowler, Roger. *Linguistic Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.
- Frow, John. "Spectacle Binding: On Character." *Poetics Today* 7.2 (1986): 227-50.
- Kaysner, Wolfgang. "Elegant Jeremiahs: The Sage from Carlyle to Mailer." Trans. Ulrich Weisstein. *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. By Wolfgang Kaiser.
- George P. Landow, comp. *A Victorian Web Book* (2007): <<http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/ej/2a2.html>>.
- Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary* (2007): <<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/grotesque>>.
- Pär Fabian, Lagerkvist. *The Dwarf*. Trans. Alexandra Dick. New York: Hill and Wang, 1945.
- Steig, Michael. "Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 29 (1970): 253-60.
- Thomson, Philip. *The Grotesque: The Critical Idiom*. London: Methuen, 1972.
- Uspensky, Boris. *A Poetics of Composition*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1973.
- Webster's English Dictionary* (2007): <<http://www.cs.chalmers.se/~hallgren/wget.cgi?grotesque>>.
- Zerweck, Bruno. "Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction." *Style* 35.1 (2001): 151-78.

Author's profile: Nitya Morales Vázquez holds a B.A. in comparative literature from the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus and a J.D. from the Interamerican University of Puerto Rico's School of Law. Morales Vázquez served as editor of the journal *Interamerican University Law Review* from 2006-07 and her publications in the legal periodical *Per Curiam* include *El Discurso Legal y sus Implicaciones Sociales* (2005) and *Reflexión en torno a la muerte: "Hágase MI VOLUNTAD"* (2005). She is now working towards an M.A. in psychology at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus on the interrelation between literature, law, and psychology. E-mail: <[nmv.law@gmail.com](mailto:nmv.law@gmail.com)>