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The Grotesque in Melville's The Confidence-Man

Dale Jones
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in Melville’s The Confidence-Man

by DALE JONES

A significant thought: the devil, the world turned literally upside down . . . can easily be imagined as the greatest humorist and whimsical man!

Jean Paul

Our literature [American] is filled with the grotesque, more so probably than any other Western literature.

William Van O’Connor

In many respects The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade, Herman Melville’s last major work of fiction intended for publication, presents its readers with a seemingly insoluble puzzle. Exactly how much the reader is able to understand of the structural and thematic complexities of The Confidence-Man is dependent upon both the particular critical presumptions which he brings to the work as well as his familiarity with the background and critical debate surrounding it. At present, no one has discovered any single approach that has resulted in a “definitive reading” of the work. Instead, the variety of critical approaches to The Confidence-Man is more often contradictory than complementary, a situation which has resulted in the absence of critical consensus concerning either the structure or the meaning of the book. One of the approaches most prevalent among critics of The Confidence-Man is to view the work as an allegory which traces a progression from the ideal, Christian charity and brotherhood, to Emersonian individualism and the extinction of Christianity. From this perspective, the Confidence-Man in all of his guises represents the primal force of evil in the universe, and the book itself comes to connote the myth of the devil’s temptation of man. Other critics, such as Newton Arvin and Edgar Dryden, stress what they view as the pervasive sense of nihilism and pessimism in The Confidence-Man. Leon Seltzer and Richard Hauck, on the other hand, are two critics who explore, through an application of Albert Camus’ existentialistic theories, Melville’s metaphysical and epistemological concern with man’s situation in an absurd universe. In this vein, Elaine Barry traces the “changing face” of Melville’s comedy and compares the dark comedy of The Confidence-Man to twentieth-century concepts of the Theater of the Absurd. Finally, there are those critics who are struck most by a recognition of the modernity of The
Confidence-Man, and who examine the book in light of its resemblance to modern and contemporary literature. Perhaps foremost among these is R. W. B. Lewis, who feels the necessity of defining a new genre for this complex book and its literary descendants: "it [The Confidence-Man] is the recognizable and awe-inspiring ancestor of several subsequent works of fiction in America: Mark Twain's . . . The Mysterious Stranger . . . Nathaniel West's The Day of the Locust, Faulkner's The Hamlet, Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, John Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor, Thomas Pynchon's V. Melville bequeathed to those works . . . the vision of an apocalypse that is no less terrible for being enormously comic, the self-extinction of a world characterized by deceit and thronging with imposters and masqueraders, and the image of the supreme tempter . . . on the prowl through that world, assisting it toward its promised end." Lewis continues by asserting that The Confidence-Man, along with these books and others, represents the "continuing 'anti-face' of the American dream, the continuing imagination of national and even universal disaster that has accompanied the bright expectancy of the millenium." The wide divergence of critical opinion outlined above, however, only serves to underscore the seeming inaccessibility of The Confidence-Man. All of these approaches are valuable keys to the understanding of the work, although, much like Melville's metaphor of the Drummond light, they tend to illuminate only portions of this perplexing book. However, Barry's reading of The Confidence-Man as the darkest comedy in American literature until Vonnegut or Pynchon, Lewis' classification of the book as the literary progenitor of a new genre, "the comic apocalypse," and Seltzer's assertion that the paradoxical and problematic nature of The Confidence-Man "would seem to invite interpretations from the radically ironic vantage point of the absurd," all suggest the possibility of another critical avenue from which to approach this work. In this respect, I believe that the pervasive sense of absurdity, structural ambiguity, demonic comedy, and purposeful inconsistency in characterization in The Confidence-Man are results of what could be called Melville's grotesque vision of the universe.

There is no agreement, however, as to what exactly the term "grotesque" means. When applied to a work of fiction, it indicates that the work contains numerous grotesque elements, or "grotesqueries," although the work as a whole might be better classified in another cate-


2. Lewis, p. 63.
gory or genre. It can also suggest, however, that the work’s infusing philosophy, metaphysical position, or Weltanschauung is firmly anchored in the artist’s conception of the universe as grotesque. The “grotesque” has been defined as a particular style, a form, a repulsive image, and a specific genre. Yet, the grotesque cuts across all genres, the tragicomic and satiric are particularly well suited to it, and therefore it must be considered as a distinct aesthetic category. Wolfgang Kayser, for example, who studied the subject intensively for fifteen years, confirms the grotesque as an aesthetic category—as a comprehensive structural principle of works of art.¹

In spite of the structural similarity of all grotesques, however, many critics have further divided the grotesque aesthetic into several types. Frances Barasch, for instance, distinguishes between two types of modern grotesque: the tragicomic-grotesque, where “real literary worlds” suggest absurd meanings; and the grotesque-absurd, in which the philosophic view and the medium coincide.⁴ Both the structure and the “philosophic view” of The Confidence-Man do in fact coincide and this would place Melville’s book squarely within Barasch’s category of the grotesque-absurd. Yet, Barasch’s distinction between the grotesque-absurd and the tragicomic-grotesque actually underscores the differences between the grotesque “esthetic” and the “genre” of tragicomedy. Here, it is interesting to note that Wolfgang Kayser, in his seminal study The Grotesque in Art and Literature, excludes the tragicomic from his definition of the grotesque even though elements of that genre are often found in grotesque art. Ultimately, however, Kayser’s definition of the grotesque and Barasch’s definition of the grotesque-absurd prove to be very nearly one and the same. Therefore, in order to simplify matters, and to ease the prose, Kayser’s terminology will be employed in this paper.

Incongruity is the keynote of the grotesque: elements that are wrested out of their normal contexts are placed in new conjunctions where they appear unnatural and discordant. There is frequently a fusion of different realms; the real and the ideal are confused; and often the atmosphere of a grotesque work of art is dream-like or even nightmarish. As in the plastic arts, grotesque literature relies upon the distortion of ingredients, unusual perspectives, and menacing forms and combinations of forms not usually associated. Several contradictory feelings are aroused by the grotesque; we are amused by the deformations but simultaneously we experience a sense of revulsion for the grotesque mixture of the ludicrous and the disturbing. This mixed reaction of terror and derision on the part of the reader of grotesque literature has been noticed by more than one writer. Coleridge found himself laughing “the

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laugh of horror" at Dante's portraits of the damned in the *Inferno* while Hugo noted, in the preface to his drama *Cromwell*, that "The grotesque . . . is everywhere; on the one hand it creates what is deformed and horrible, on the other what is comic and farcical." A sense of meaninglessness and absurdity is the natural outcome of the grotesque's unresolved tensions among numerous contradictory and inharmonious elements. In a grotesque universe, man experiences feelings of alienation in a world which breaks apart and remains inaccessible. As Kayser defines it, "THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD [Kayser's capitalization]" and is "primarily the expression of our failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe." Barasch, in her historical survey of grotesque art and its meanings, sums up the grotesque in much the same manner as Kayser: "for the artists of different ages, instinctively or consciously, expressed in fantasies of mixed humor and fear, the common perception that the total human experience is beyond logical ordering."

In discussing the degree and extent to which Melville employs grotesque elements in *The Confidence-Man*, one is naturally tempted to demonstrate "influences" upon his work by writers who are more commonly associated with the grotesque style. Although there is some evidence that Melville may have been indirectly acquainted with E. T. A. Hoffmann's literary grotesques in *Nachtstucke and Fantasiestucke in Callot's Manier*, as well as with something of Edgar Allan Poe's work and literary reputation, it appears that he arrived at the grotesque universe he portrays in *The Confidence-Man* without a particular model for the grotesque in mind. This is not to say, however, that in *The Confidence-Man*, Melville consciously set out to fashion a grotesque piece of fiction; rather, the grotesque nature of *The Confidence-Man* is the product of Melville's increasing recognition of a terrifying, although sometimes ludicrous, ambiguity at the heart of human existence. In this respect, the title of his earlier novel, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, becomes especially significant in that it measures Melville's growing awareness of man's alienation before an absurd and inscrutable cosmos—a cosmos that is later portrayed in all of its ambiguity in *The Confidence-Man*.

Among the most persistent motifs of the grotesque, according to Wolfgang Kayser, "we find human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks." This motif

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of masks, and its frequently concomitant motifs of disguises and role-playing, has metaphysical implications in *The Confidence-Man* and is prevalent throughout the book. The book’s subtitle itself, *His Masquerade*, suggests that human appearance may not be any true indication of human reality. Numerous inexplicable metamorphoses occur throughout *The Confidence-Man*, for instance, and these raise disturbing questions concerning the validity of any concept of “human nature”: the Black Guinea turns dog-like in appearance; a pleasant and good-natured merchant speaks dark truths under the influence of wine; the timid Sophomore becomes an assertive capitalist and speculator; a skin-flint miser turns into a reckless investor; Pitch, seemingly a misanthrope, is in reality, according to the cosmopolitan a “surly philanthropist”; Charlie Noble, the cosmopolitan’s “boon companion,” in a chapter significantly titled “A Metamorphosis More Surprising Than Any in Ovid,” becomes misanthropic when asked for a loan; and, finally, the Confidence-Man’s apparent mastery of disguise and role-playing, along with the numerous transformations cited above, suggests the impossibility of one’s ever understanding human motivation and conduct at all. Indeed, as the cosmopolitan informs another character, the surly Pitch, “Life is a pic-nic *en costume*; one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool” (p. 116). In the world of *The Confidence-Man* then, human beings do not appear to have an innate or inviolable identity, but rather whatever identity they do have is temporary and involves playing a role. This idea of role-playing exists throughout *The Confidence-Man* in the form of what one might call the “play-life metaphor,” where Melville shakes the reader’s sense of reality by treating life as if it were a play. And it is increasingly difficult as the novel progresses to know where the play ends and reality begins—for instance: “With these words and a grand scorn the cosmopolitan turned on his heel, leaving his companion [Egbert, the practical Emersonian] at a loss to determine where exactly the fictitious character had been dropped, and the real one, if any, resumed. If any, because with pointed meaning, there occurred to him, as he gazed after the cosmopolitan, these familiar lines: ‘All the world’s a stage / And all the men and women merely players / Who have their exits and their entrances / And one man in his time plays many parts.’”12 Egbert’s confusion over where the cosmopolitan’s masquerade ends and his reality resumes raises the frightening question of whether or not such a thing as a real or fixed human identity actually exists. It is just possible, for instance, that what we know of another human being is not based upon any knowledge of his innate reality but rather upon the part he is acting at the moment. In *The Confidence-Man*, human beings appear reduced to act-

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ing a fiction, or series of fictions. And what identity they have is more a function of the social mask they are obliged to wear than a result of any awareness they might have of their own core identity. In this respect, Paul Brodtkorb has found the basic vision in *The Confidence-Man* to be one "of masks; and underneath, masks, further masks; and under all masks there is more than a chance that there is nothing at all." And Wolfgang Kayser’s definition of the unity of perspective in the grotesque would seem to support Brodtkorb’s hypothesis, for the grotesque is represented as an ‘unimpassioned view of life on earth as an empty, meaningless puppet play or a caricatural marionette theatre.’

The very structure of *The Confidence-Man*, however, rests upon ambiguity and incongruity; and Brodtkorb’s suggestion that beneath all of these layers of masks in *The Confidence-Man* lies “nothing at all,” represents only one possibility concerning the nature of human experience and existence from among several presented in the novel. Nearly all of the grotesque elements that Melville employs in *The Confidence-Man* would appear to present human existence as puppet-like and devoid of meaning. Yet, according to Richard Cook, they can also function to establish the limits of our understanding. Not being able to see a deeper reality beneath the gaudy surface phenomena of *The Confidence-Man* is not necessarily proof that it does not exist; for running parallel in the novel to the many intimations that all of life and human experience may be meaningless are also numerous suggestions that we both embody and are surrounded by indecipherable secrets and inscrutable truths. One character, for instance, compares the easy optimism and belief in a benevolent universe of the P.I.O. Man, another disguise of the Confidence-Man, to a “landsman at sea”: “you . . . don’t know the ropes, the very things everlasting pulled before your eyes. Serpent-like, they glide about, traveling blocks too subtle for you. In short, the entire ship is a riddle. Why, you green ones wouldn’t know if she were unseaworthy; but still, with thumbs stuck back into your arm-holes, pace the rotten planks, singing, like a fool, words put into your green mouth by the cunning owner, the man who heavily insuring it, sends his ship to be wrecked—‘A wet sheet and a flowing sea!’” (p. 103). Obviously, like the masquerade on board the *Fidèle*, the “landsman at sea” image functions as a metaphor for the human condition: there may very well be meanings, possibly sinister ones, behind the world’s shifting appearances, but even if there are, our eyes are not attuned to them and they remain half-seen if seen at all. Not only, therefore, is human nature “past finding out” (p. 59), but the cosmos too remains veiled and a mystery.

Most of the grotesque elements in *The Confidence-Man*, like everything else in the book, are muted or subdued. There are, for example, none of the terrifying or hideous characters that one often encounters in the tales of Hoffman or Poe. The book's titular character, the Confidence-Man himself, though often associated through Melville's imagery with Satanic and evil forces, is neither the defiant and romantic Satan of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, nor, except in one of his several disguises, does he even resemble the bestial and diabolical demon of Christian mythology. Instead, the Confidence-Man, particularly in his final and most prolonged disguise as the cosmopolitan, is in manner and appearance a rather urbane and civilized gentleman—although his ludicrous style of dress might suggest otherwise to his fellow passengers on board the steamboat, *Fidèle*:

... the parti-hued, and rather plumagry aspect of the stranger, no bigot it would seem, but a liberalist, in dress, and whose wardrobe, almost anywhere than on the liberal Mississippi, used to all sorts of fantastic informalities, might have looked, if anything, a little out of the common. ... In short, the stranger sported a vesture barred with various hues, that of the cochineal predominating, in style participating of a Highland plaid, Emir's robe, and French blouse; from its plaited sort of front peeped glimpses of a flowered regatta-shirt, while for the rest, white trousers of ample duck flowed over maroon-colored slippers, and a jaunty smoking-cap of regal purple crowned him off at top; king of traveled goodfellows, evidently. (p. 114)

Significantly, the narrator sums up the cosmopolitan's appearance and attire as "Grotesque" (p. 114). And later, in one of the three important digressions on the art of fiction in the novel, he refers to the cosmopolitan's particolored coat and "fantastic" capers as those of a harlequin (p. 158). We are further informed that, even though the cosmopolitan's antics and apparel appear unreal, his character represents in fact reality transformed; indeed, it is "more reality, than real life itself can show" (p. 158). The occasion for this digression is that the seemingly genial and philanthropic cosmopolitan is poised to relate the "rather grave story" of Charlemont, the gentleman-madman. Anticipating the potential confusion over the "something inharmonious" between the cosmopolitan's earlier manifestations of "boisterous hilarity" with one of the *Fidèle*'s passengers and his "restrained good-nature" with another, the narrator directs the reader to his earlier digression on the apparent inconsistency of another character. Yet, the narrator's defense of the cosmopolitan's apparent inconsistency of character only serves to draw attention to it and simultaneously underscores what the careful reader already sus-

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16. One might well wonder if Charles Baudelaire had read *The Confidence-Man* before composing "The Generous Gambler" (*Paris Spleen*). Compare Baudelaire's portrait of a gentlemanly devil in the following passage with Melville's: "We talked of the universe, of its creation and of its final destruction; of the big idea of the century, that is, the idea of progress and perfectibility, and in general of all forms of human infatuation. On this subject His Highness was never at a loss for gay and irreproachable ironies, and he expressed himself with a subtle address and impassible humor such as I have not met with even the most famous talkers of humanity. He explained the absurdity of the different philosophies which have up to the present time had possession of the human brain..."
pects—the cosmopolitan is not all, or perhaps he is more, than he appears to be. The narrator’s referral of the reader to the earlier digression bears out the reader’s suspicions, for here he compares his method of characterization to the inconsistency and incongruity found in nature. Like the flying-squirrel and the duck-billed beaver that the narrator employs as his examples of a surprising inconsistency in nature, the cosmopolitan is also “at variance” with himself and “incongruous” in his parts—in effect, grotesque. But, as the narrator further asserts, human nature itself is based upon inconsistency and, in view of its contrasts, it is “past finding out” (p. 59).

The grotesque is often employed in The Confidence-Man to explore this enigma of human nature. Frequently, a character is presented as a combination of human and animal elements or a fusion of organic and mechanical ones. These particular fusions of incongruous ingredients serve to underscore man’s fallen state, his incompleteness and essential deformity, the brutish and the diabolical in him. In the gallery of grotesque portraits of The Confidence-Man there are numerous characters who are depicted as either animal-like or machine-like or both. Yet, this represents only one side of human nature. There are also continuing suggestions of man’s possible divinity. Indeed, as the cosmopolitan informs the surprised barber in one of the book’s last episodes (Chapter XIII), man remains a mystery: “Only a man? As if to be but man were nothing. But don’t be too sure what I am. You call me man, just as the townfolk called the angels who, in man’s form, came to Lot’s house; just as the Jew rustics called the devils who, in man’s form, haunted the tombs. You can conclude nothing absolute from the human form, barber” (p. 193). Although numerous critics have found grounds in the cosmopolitan’s statement for assigning him a supernatural and Satanic nature, it seems more likely, as R. W. B. Lewis asserts, that he “really is Everyman—that is, Everyman as all men; manifesting to a splintered world the grand human potential for demonism or divinity, summoning mankind to choose.” The cosmopolitan represents our reality transformed and intensified. His character, like that of all men, is inconsistent, ambiguous, incongruous, enigmatic, and from his appearance and behavior we “can conclude nothing absolute.” He is, in the broadest sense of the word, grotesque.

Confronted with a universe that is inscrutable and humanity which is “past finding out,” one’s reaction may expectedly be one of surprise

17. Examples of this fusion of the human and the animal and the organic and the inorganic are seen throughout the novel: The Black Guinea, like numerous other characters, is dog-like in manner and appearance (p. 7); the miser is penguin-like, fish-like, and buzzard-like (pp. 61-62); Egbert appears “like one of these wire men from a toy snuffbox” (p. 171); the Soldier of Fortune is compared to a hyena (p. 81); Pitch is “ursine in aspect” (p. 91); and the list continues with characters compared to snakes, cats, wolves, foxes, panthers, leopards, sloes, sheep, elephants, gazelles, and steam engines, cornthreshers, puppets, etc.

18. Lewis, p. 73.
and horror; yet, this situation is just as likely to trigger an absurd and almost “mad” type of laughter. In this respect, Melville’s unstable and ambiguous world in *The Confidence-Man* represents the universe as the one “vast practical joke” that Ishmael, in a chapter appropriately entitled “The Hyena,” describes in *Moby-Dick*: “There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody’s expense but his own.” A practical joke, however, often results in as much pain as it does humor, and it is this sort of laughter mixed with pain that we see in *The Confidence-Man*. To be more explicit, the laughter we get in *The Confidence-Man*, according to Elaine Barry, “is the ambiguous or frenetic laughter that is close to despair, in a world too complex and devious to allow a sense of humor to be any kind of saving grace.”

In *The Confidence-Man*, the best example of this type of ambiguous laughter belongs to the wooden-legged man who in one scene accosts the Confidence-Man and another passenger with a “sort of laugh more like a groan than a laugh; and yet, somehow it seemed intended for a laugh” (p. 25). “Laughter originates on the comic and caricatural fringe of the grotesque,” according to Kayser, and “Filled with bitterness, it takes on characteristics of the mocking, cynical and ultimately satanic laughter while turning into the grotesque.”

The wooden-legged and gimlet-eyed man is caricatural and his laughter is infused with cynicism, mockery, and derision. The reader, I believe, is meant to be simultaneously amused and repulsed by him; for how else is one to react to either the sarcastic and unpleasant story that he relates, “in his porcupine way,” to the Confidence-Man (a story the narrator feels obliged to render the reader in a “good-natured version”), or to his laughter which follows his tale—laughter that is a “long, gasping, rasping sort of taunting cry, intolerable as that of a high pressure engine jeering off steam” (p. 26)?

The reader’s mixed reaction to a character who is distorted and disproportionate, in effect a caricature, is a response typically associated with grotesque art and literature. It is also a response engendered by one’s confrontation with those experiences of life that are incongruous, ambiguous, and beneath their surfaces, sinister. In an early scene in *The Confidence-Man*, for example, Melville’s portrayal of an absurd style of “almsgiving” by a crowd of passengers on board the *Fidèle* appears designed to elicit just such an ambiguous response from his readers. The subject of the passenger’s questionable charity is the Black Guinea, a “grotesque negro cripple” with leather stumps for legs whose stature and appearance is compared to those of a Newfoundland dog:

In short, as in appearance he seemed a dog, so now, in a merry way, like a dog he began to be treated. Still shuffling among the crowd, now and then he would pause, throwing back his head and opening his mouth like an elephant for tossed apples at a menagerie; when, making a space before him, people would have a bout at a strange sort of pitch-penny game, the cripple's mouth being at once target and purse, and he hailing each expertly-caught copper with a cracked bravura from his tambourine. . . . And nearly always he grinned, and only once or twice did he wince, which was when certain coins, tossed by more playful almoners, came inconveniently nigh to his teeth, an accident whose unwelcomeness was not unedged by the circumstance that the pennies thus thrown proved buttons. (p. 8)

Again our reaction is an ambiguous one, for not only are we simultaneously amused and disgusted by the Black Guinea's dog-like appearance and behavior, but we are also repulsed by the crowd's inhuman treatment of him. The scene is abnormal and grotesque; it affronts any belief the reader may have held concerning the dignity and innate rationality of the human species and, coming as it does in an early chapter, it establishes the book's satiric and mordantly comic tone. And it is darkly comic, at least during our second reading of the book, for we are now aware that the Black Guinea is one disguise of the Confidence-Man. The deformity the reader's attention is now focused upon is not the negro cripple's but the crowd's sham charity and distorted humanity. Mankind, implies the narrator (and the crowd on board the Fidèle is obviously a microcosmic cross-section of all humanity) is itself morally and spiritually crippled if it cannot "refrain from picking a fellow-limper to pieces" (p. 9).

In her study of the grotesque and its meanings, Frances Barasch asserts that in grotesque literature, "the philosophic view and the medium coincide."21 This is particularly true of The Confidence-Man as the grotesque perspective provides the book with its unity and, at the same time, determines the nature of its content. John G. Cawelti has commented on the book's "frame of ambiguity" and its structure as based upon "incomplete reversals at every level."22 And Walter Dubler views the structure of The Confidence-Man as "two thirds of a dialectic: a thesis and an antithesis are presented, but no synthesis is developed." Dubler goes on to assert that the work does have an "undeveloped synthesis" (of goodness, decency, and righteousness), but that it falls outside the scope of Melville's literal intention, "which is to depict various forms of evil."23 Yet the elements which provide The Confidence-Man with a sense of structural coherence and unity would appear to be more closely associated with some of the structural techniques found in music rather than those found in literature. The structure of The Confidence-
Man, for instance, appears to mirror the unifying structural devices of a Baroque fugue. Just as the fugue is conceived polyphonically (contrapuntally), with lines of music frequently imitating one another, so also is Melville's book, where the themes, characters, motifs, and situations often repeat themselves, although with variation and in a variety of keys. The structure of The Confidence-Man also reflects the fugue's emphasis upon an essential theme, called the subject, and an opposing theme, or countersubject. In The Confidence-Man, this interplay between subject and countersubject is manifested in the contrapuntal relationship Melville develops between the opposing themes of order and chaos. This basic dichotomy is refracted throughout the book in the contrapuntal clash between charity and "no trust," faith and disbelief, the divine and the diabolic, health and disease, reason and irrationality, reality as actual or a dream, truth and falsehood, philanthropy and misanthropy, confidence and suspicion, and the list goes on. In The Confidence-Man, the unresolved clash between chaos and order, and between faith and disbelief, results in the novel's persistent element of ambiguity and its pervasive sense of absurdity. And, in this respect, the contrapuntal quality of the fugue-like structure of The Confidence-Man is perfectly wedded to Melville's presentation in this book of the terrifying ambiguity that lies at the core of human existence.

Wolfgang Kayser has written that the creator of grotesques, "must not and cannot suggest a meaning. Nor must he distract our attention from the absurd." Throughout The Confidence-Man there exists a background of cosmic pointlessness and a deep suspicion that all beliefs are demonstrably illusory, false, and absurd. For these reasons, numerous critics have found Melville's metaphysical position in The Confidence-Man to be nihilistic. In The Confidence-Man, however, Melville does not depict a universe that is necessarily devoid of meaning, but rather he presents man as incapable of attaining any knowledge of an ultimate reality; for, as R. W. B. Lewis asserts, it is Melville's drastic aim in The Confidence-Man to bring into question the sheer possibility of knowing anything. For Melville, both reality and mankind itself are enigmas that remain forever past finding out. In this respect, Melville's employment of grotesque elements in The Confidence-Man permit him to present a paradigm of a reality that is "enigmatic, ambiguous, inscrutable, and vaguely terrifying." The odd and often distorted perspective of the grotesque enables Melville to shake the foundations of the reader's confidence in his world view by depriving him of the safeguards provided by tradition and society. As one can see, therefore, the
grotesque, with its emphasis upon the ambiguous and the absurd, is an aesthetic well-suited to the artistic purposes of a man of whom Nathaniel Hawthorne once said: "He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief."28

Kendall College
Evanston, Illinois