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Tilting at Numbers: A Critical Analysis of the Quixotic Attitudes and Picaresque Undertones in Ramsey Campbell's *The Count of Eleven*

Ramsey Campbell's distinguished literary career began as a result of being introduced to the eldritch oeuvre of Howard Phillips Lovecraft.¹ He is counted as one of the most prolific writers of British horror,² but the motifs, character archetypes, and literary structures found in his writings often stem from other genres, including fairytales, detective stories, and swashbucklers – to name but a few. Consequently, this article aims to analyze *The Count of Eleven*, one of Campbell's most prominent works, through a dual spectrum of quixotic mentalities and picaresque traditions. As might be expected, the analytical process presented herein does not limit itself to a single genre of fiction. Its goal is to estimate the breadth and depth of the conceptual interconnections that exist between Campbell's novel and one of the cornerstones of pícaro-focused storytelling – Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. This will allow for an evaluation of the effectiveness with which the British writer implements picaresque concepts to achieve narrative goals usually associated with works of horror and social commentaries.

¹ Sunand Tryambak Joshi, *Ramsey Campbell and Modern Horror Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 4.

² Gary William Crawford, "Introduction," in *Ramsey Campbell: Critical Essays on the Modern Master of Horror*, ed. Gary William Crawford (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2014), vii.

As this analysis is largely character-centric, its first step will be to outline the psychological makeup of Campbell's protagonist. However, before the analytical process begins in earnest, it would be prudent to provide a concise (but by no means exhaustive) explanation of what the *picaresque* actually is – or how it will be interpreted in the following pages. In its basic form – that most often described as the original concept or seen as a typical branching-off point for different variations and iterations – the term refers to a specific genre of prose (the *picaresque novel*) which is “usually autobiographical, presenting the story of a rascal of low degree engaged in menial tasks and making his living more through his wits than his industry.”³ The word's etymology can be traced back to the Spanish *pícaro* (*adventurer, rogue*),⁴ and the suffix – *esque* signifies the passing on of specific aspects, suggesting something that it is “like or in the style of” the base noun.⁵ Most of the classic entries in this literary category tend to have an episodic nature, but do not conform to a strictly unified textual structure, and this lack of structural uniformity becomes progressively more pronounced the further one moves away (in time and/or space) from the genre's Spanish origins.⁶

Fortunately, scholarly attempts to define the conceptual elements of picaresque storytelling have met with a greater degree of success – a good example of these efforts can be found in the writings of Frank Wadleigh Chandler, whose insightful enumeration of the Spanish *pícaro*'s principle character traits (despite its being more than one hundred years old) still remains a valid academic resource.⁷ Thrall and Hibbard have carried out a similar procedure, creating a list of seven chief qualities that “distinguish

³ Clarence Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 4th ed. (Indianapolis: ITT Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing Company, 1985), 330.

⁴ “Picaresque,” Merriam-Webster, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/picaresque>.

⁵ “Suffix -esque,” Cambridge Dictionary, accessed November 10, 2022, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/esque>.

⁶ Published anonymously due to its controversial content, the novella *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes and of His Fortunes and Adversities* (1554) – frequently shortened to *Lazarillo de Tormes* – is widely considered to be the keystone of the modern picaresque. It was (eventually) followed by other roguish works of import, including Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599), Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605/1615), and Francisco de Quevedo's *El Buscón* (1626). Predictably, the nascent genre's popularity in its country of origin gave rise to many imitations, translations, adaptations, and homages abroad, the most noteworthy of which emerged in Italy, Germany, France, and England.

⁷ Frank Wadleigh Chandler, *Romances of Roguery*, Reprint (New York: Burt Franklin Publishing, 1961), 45–46.; The original edition was published in 1899.

the picaresque novel.”⁸ These include a first-person narrative, a protagonist from a lower social stratum, a simple plot, little to no character development, plain and/or realistic descriptions, the presence of satire, and a personalized code of conduct on the part of the protagonist.⁹ It should be noted that, despite their helpfulness, these listings are more like guidelines than exclusive or formal regulations for the genre, and even archetypal picaresque tales often fail to conform to all of them.¹⁰ In fact, as observed by Harry Sieber in his interpretation of its OED entry, the contemporary version of the word *picaresque* does not simply rely on a static, calcified link to a single, highly specific genre of prose; it should instead be interpreted as a “*literary* phenomenon, a work of fiction which is concerned with the habits and lives of rogues” or as a “style of fiction, that is, a kind or type of work which is distinguishable from other fictional styles.”¹¹ These high degrees of mutability and applicability on the part of the term synergize surprisingly well with the exploits and psychological frameworks it is meant to describe – a fact which will become quite obvious in the following paragraphs, and our analysis of Campbell’s protagonist.

In the initial sections of the novel the protagonist’s roguish and quixotic tendencies remain almost entirely hidden. The scene in which Jack opens up his rental store presents him as a calm and collected man, whose highly specific sense of humor serves as a protective mental barrier against daily toils and troubles. One could even get the impression that the author, making use of concepts and narrative elements which reach back to the picaresque tradition of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe,¹² aims to utilize the hero chiefly as a satirical tool in the criticism of the problems and imperfections that characterized British society in the early 1990s. The perspective in question is established mainly as a result of the vivid psychological contrast which Campbell creates between Jack and the various background characters that visit his store.

⁸ William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, *A Handbook to Literature*, Rev. ed. (New York: Odyssey Press, 1960), 352.

⁹ Thrall and Hibbard, 352–53.

¹⁰ Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, for example, is neither narrated in first person nor lacks in character development.

¹¹ Harry Sieber, *The Picaresque* (London: Routledge, 2018), 10.

¹² Sieber, 63.

Anettlesome religious fanatic,¹³ an aggressive old man with advanced dementia,¹⁴ an elitist housewife who subsists on gossip,¹⁵ onlookers who find joy and excitement in the misfortune of others¹⁶—all of these fictional figures represent attitudes so antagonistic, demanding, and extreme that their mere presence appears to threaten not only Jack’s peace of mind, but also the stability of the novel’s narrative. During the protagonist’s interactions with these unsympathetic individuals, his sharp wit functions as a stabilizing counterweight for their mentality-destabilizing efforts.¹⁷ The attacks repelled by the hero are not unlike the malignant spells cast by Cervantes’ evil enchanters – their function is to entrance and confuse the victim, to make him succumb to a set of reductionistic, arbitrarily imposed norms that suit the beguiler’s whims.¹⁸ Afterwards, once they are sufficiently entrenched in the unfortunate’s mind, these dictums steadily replace his sense of wonder and mystery with a mixture of conformism and banality. And although Jack opposes these vapidly-infused assaults with a steadfastness that is nothing short of herculean, the endless attacks eventually begin to wear him out. They imbalance the stability of his psyche. Due to the excessive defensiveness of his mind, a defensiveness which borders on the pathological, the protagonist’s consciousness is soon propelled towards the polar opposite of banality – and into the warm embrace of quixotism.

It should be pointed out, however, that the changes which Campbell’s protagonist starts to exhibit have – for obvious reasons – very little in common with chivalric romances. It is grounded in slapstick comedies, which constitute an entirely different (and arguably more surreal) genre of fiction.¹⁹ The character even makes direct references to some of his quixotic source material, which includes, among others, the acts of such comedians

¹³ Ramsey Campbell, *The Count of Eleven* (New York: Tor Books, 1992), 9.

¹⁴ Campbell, 20.

¹⁵ Campbell, 25, 27.

¹⁶ Campbell, 35.

¹⁷ Campbell, 11, 21.

¹⁸ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2003), 195.

¹⁹ The term itself is “often thought to derive from the English translation of *bataccio*, the Italian word used to describe the wooden stick carried by Arlecchino in the *commedia dell’arte*” (Louise Peacock, *Slapstick and Comic Performance* [London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014], 15).

as the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy, and the Three Stooges.²⁰ The make-believe mischief that invariably accompanies performances of this type often relies on grotesque imagery and evokes feelings of *schadenfreude*.²¹ Slapstick characters engage in activities and suffer from mishaps that in real-world circumstances would pose a severe threat to their life and health, but the laws that govern the fictional universe either outright nullify such physical injuries or make them largely inconsequential. As noted by Louise Peacock, slapstick “offers the sound [...] and appearance of the infliction and suffering of pain without the actual anguish.”²² But Campbell, despite his many references to comedic antics and picaresque myth, remains faithful to the conventions of horror, and this means that the characters who find themselves the victims of the Count’s highly peculiar sense of humor cannot rely on genre-based safety mechanisms. There is no laugh track. If the delivered blow is strong enough, they simply keel over and die.

The hero’s metamorphosis into a murderous version of Groucho Marx is not instantaneous, however. It occurs gradually, and the reader is allowed to witness it in its entirety, although the initial signs of the process can be easy to overlook. Jack makes sporadic remarks about his favourite comedies,²³ subtly criticizes contemporary cinematographic attempts at humor,²⁴ and regularly indulges his anxiety-based compulsion to crack jokes.²⁵ These behaviors are soon replaced by more disturbing symptoms which include, among others, vivid comparisons between real-life events and slapstick routines,²⁶ constant slips of the tongue on the part of the protagonist that make his interactions with other characters inadvertently funny,²⁷ and, on

²⁰ It is worth mentioning that one of the roots of this physical humor can be traced back to the archetype of the XVI-century picaresque – and his German equivalent, the *Schalksnarr* – whose actions frequently lead to some sort of physical tomfoolery meant to ridicule the dominant societal authority (Sieber, *The Picaresque*, 44).

²¹ Encyclopedia Britannica defines *schadenfreude* as “a feeling of enjoyment that comes from seeing or hearing about the troubles of other people” (“Schadenfreude,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed on November 15, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/schadenfreude>). Reactions of this sort have “mainly been condemned throughout history” and are still regarded with a degree of ambivalence (Wilco W. van Dijk and Jaap W. Ouwerkerk. “Introduction to schadenfreude,” in *Schadenfreude: Understanding Pleasure at the Misfortune of Others*, ed. Wilco W. van Dijk and Jaap W. Ouwerkerk [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014], 3–4).

²² Peacock, *Slapstick and Comic Performance*, 16.

²³ Campbell, *The Count of Eleven*, 10.

²⁴ Campbell, 8.

²⁵ Campbell, 7, 11.

²⁶ Campbell, 36, 62.

²⁷ Campbell, 50–52, 64.

one occasion, a dream vision which includes a reenactment of a popular scene from a Marx Brothers movie (with Jack acting as the lead).²⁸

The final phase introduces an even more disturbing element to the above list – an individualized quixotic narration, during which the constantly floundering Jack Orchard is replaced by the enigmatic and highly eccentric Count, whose picaresque sense of humor can be deadly. Obvious Jungian undertones underline the entirety of this interplay. Indeed, as the following excerpt will attest, one could even interpret it as an interaction between the protagonist's conscious awareness and his *shadow*, a Jekyll-and-Hyde dynamic during which the latter overpowers the former:²⁹

Jack shook hands with a laughing man who immediately burst into flame. The heat fused their hands together, and Jack's arm was on fire. The lack of any sensation frightened him, so that he did his best to cry out, though it felt as if he was attempting to use someone else's voice. The feeble groans sounded familiar, and he thought he would rather not remember where he'd heard them. He sucked in a breath which sent a sharp pain through his teeth, and darkness extinguished the flames.³⁰

When Jack finally succumbs to his extravagant, shadow-laced personality, the influence of the aforementioned imagery on his life becomes even more pronounced. Dreams and reminiscences are no longer able to contain his obsession with physical comedy, which leads to random slapstick scenarios overshadowing his – and the reader's – perception of the setting. This erosion of mental barriers manifests in a twofold way. Firstly, the narration is constantly being retracted and redacted – a result of the Count playing out a given situation over and over in his head, until he finally decides on the best combination of props and personas.³¹ These quixotic retakes, while not original by any means, almost always take the reader by surprise on account of their length and seamlessness. Secondly, Jack begins to inject blatant slapstick fantasies into the actual story.³² Such intermissions are brief, obvious, and usually have little bearing on

²⁸ Campbell, 103.

²⁹ Anthony Stevens, *On Jung* (London: Penguin Group, 1990), 50.

³⁰ Campbell, *The Count of Eleven*, 211.

³¹ Campbell, 142, 164, 232.

³² Campbell, 143, 165, 262.

the novel's progress, but they allow one to look directly at the quixotic proceedings taking place in Jack's mind, making them highly immersive.

But a truly quixotic mentality, in addition to its inherent qualities of surreality, idealism, and impracticality, requires a clearly defined goal and an internally coherent paradigm – otherwise, all we are dealing with is another uninspired instance of insanity. As far as such personal goals are concerned, the factors that motivate Campbell's protagonist hold a certain degree of similarity to those typical of the English rogue. Compared to the classic Spanish picaresque, who deals with hunger and poverty on a daily basis, changing masters and doing odd jobs that harm his dignity, rogues with Anglo-Saxon roots are often seen as far more "industrious."³³ The English scoundrel is a self-made man, and he worships his creator. But Jack, despite sharing the goals of this archetype, lacks the truly pragmatic, cutthroat attitude which would help him to realize such goals. Likewise, his criteria for success are closer to those specified by the American Dream.³⁴ The hero longs for an idyllic, pastel environment known from old-fashioned sitcoms like *Leave it to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best*. A spacious house in the suburbs, a fulfilling, well-paying job, a wife and a daughter who shower him with unconditional affection – the protagonist constantly draws on these and similar concepts. The fallacy in Jack's thinking lies in the fact that he does not approach these ideas as complex, reality-grounded goals that require logical planning, determination, and a great degree of self-control. He simply *hopes* that they will eventually come true.

It is difficult not to compare this attitude to the ramblings of Cervantes' knight errant, in whose speeches the Don ardently praises the beauty, moral values, and carefreeness of the pastoral lifestyle.³⁵ But these sentiments have little to no grounding in reality; they are based almost exclusively on the Don's fantastical reading material. Even first-hand evidence fails to alter the hidalgo's standpoint on the matter. Despite his direct (and extremely painful) interactions with actual shepherds, whose coarseness and constant, work-related agitation the novel depicts in great detail,³⁶

³³ Sieber, *The Picaresque*, 54.

³⁴ Sarah Churchwell, "A Brief History of the American Dream," George W. Bush Presidential Center, accessed November 18, 2022, <https://www.bushcenter.org/catalyst/state-of-the-american-dream/churchwell-history-of-the-american-dream>.

³⁵ Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 77.

³⁶ Cervantes, 130, 841.

Don Quixote not only does not abandon the Arcadian ideal concocted by his addled mind, but even considers temporarily abandoning his knightly career to engage in it.³⁷

Jack's quixotic efforts resist reality's advances equally – if not more – effectively thanks to his highly personal paradigm, which revolves around the concept of manipulating luck. However, this is not the classic, picaresque interpretation of good fortune. In the protagonist's private world, there is no place for happenstance or for the happy little coincidences that the Spanish pícaro employed to escape punishment or avoid responsibility. Unwittingly channeling the most basic tenets of the anti-picaresque, Jack firmly believes that one needs to help one's own luck, but in his case this conviction does not simply refer to developing a greater deal of self-confidence or a more proactive attitude towards daily issues.³⁸ Neither does Jack perceive luck as an abstract concept or as a personally beneficial outcome of a series of random events. For him, it is not an untamable force that permeates the entirety of the universe or a humanoid personification he could barter with. None of the above classifications match the protagonist's paradigmatic requirements. He instead categorizes luck as an amalgamation of a resource, an asset, and a currency. This leads to situations where Jack attempts to quantify the amount of luck he possesses at any given time. He calculates how much of it he has already spent and evaluates the most effective ways to increase the scope and potency of its influence.³⁹

And all of these actions are accomplished by means of another quixotic mechanism, this time based on numerology. The beginnings of the protagonist's fascination with numbers can be traced back to his childhood – it was implanted in Jack's mind by his parents,⁴⁰ and the stability it offered was quickly became a defensive mechanism to protect him from the chaos and unpredictability of everyday life. This piece of background information allows one to comprehend why almost all of Jack's deranged decisions are

³⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Don Quixote* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 96.

³⁸ Ultimately, these personal qualities *are* achieved – Jack eventually develops them as an unforeseen byproduct of the Count's many luck-altering escapades.

³⁹ Readers looking for potential supernatural aspects in Campbell's narrative might want to consider the notion that Jack, without even realizing it, siphons luck from other people. The Count's interaction with his ex-business partner, Gavin Edge, is certainly framed this way. Even if one dismisses it as nothing more than an example of Jack's quixotic reasoning, there is no denying that it influences both of the involved characters on a psychological level, revitalizing the protagonist and turning Gavin into a nervous wreck (Campbell, *The Count of Eleven*, 184).

⁴⁰ Campbell, 42.

based on the correlation of two numbers – the lucky eleven, which features in the novel’s title, and the unlucky (dreaded, even) thirteen.⁴¹ Jack sends out his missives on numerologically beneficial days,⁴² waits the “proper” amount of time before reattempting a stressful task,⁴³ and even classifies potential correspondents based on the numerical values of their first and last names.⁴⁴ Likewise, if, while hunting for his next victim, he encounters an object or a situation that “[advertises] the value of his name” – which, according to Jack’s calculations,⁴⁵ also adds up to eleven⁴⁶ – he knows it is time to act.⁴⁷ All of these personal rituals are meant to accumulate the highest amount of luck possible. Luck is then, by means of some undisclosed, mystical process, transformed into a whole cascade of positive events. If this procedure is repeated enough times, Jack might be able to fulfil his idyllic dreams of familial wellbeing. But Ramsey Campbell does not allow his protagonist to fulfil this anti-picaresque, quixotism-fueled success story. At least not fully, not exactly in the way Jack initially envisioned. Still, considering the fates of other family units dreamt up by the British author – like the Priestleys (*Nazareth Hill*) and the Travises (*The One Safe Place*) – the Orchards’ ending is a fairly positive one by comparison.

And yet, these grim overtones remain largely concealed at the outset of Jack’s story. In fact, its formative aspects bear a close resemblance to the quixotic experiences of the gangling hidalgo from La Mancha. Inadvertently mimicking the first steps of Don Quixote’s character arc,⁴⁸ the comical Count arms himself with his fantastically-tinged paradigm and then sets out to challenge the laws and limitations that govern Campbell’s setting. The character is able to overcome many of the obstacles that are laid before him, and although most of Jack’s successes are infused with his personalized brand of madness and are somewhat open to readerly interpretation,⁴⁹ they

⁴¹ He even incorporates the unlucky number into his ritualistic suicide in order to make sure that it will be impossible for anyone to save him (Campbell, 316).

⁴² Campbell, 73.

⁴³ Campbell, 269.

⁴⁴ Campbell, 73.

⁴⁵ Campbell, 41.

⁴⁶ Although his daughter offers a far less optimistic interpretation of the family’s surname (Campbell, 191).

⁴⁷ Campbell, 185.

⁴⁸ Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 20.

⁴⁹ But not to the extent of those “achieved” by Alonso Quijano, whose victories play out largely in his mind’s eye (Nabokov, *Lectures on Don Quixote*, 103).

nevertheless strengthen his resolve and assure him that his cause is just.⁵⁰ By contrast, the protagonist's setbacks and failures are largely undisputable – their outcomes tend to negatively impact the wellbeing of Jack's family, and this, in turn, occasionally makes him question (and modify) his chosen *modus operandi*.⁵¹ Predictably enough, such mishaps also aggravate the inner conflict between Jack's secret personality of a roguish extravert and his mundane identity of an ordinary, slightly awkward man, whose goals and expectations rarely align with reality.

Keeping the above information in mind – and seeing as quite a few of the British author's tales are structured around the concept of an insidious, socioculturally induced helplessness which eventually overwhelms and snuffs out the protagonist's existence – it would not be unreasonable for a first-time reader to assume that *The Count of Eleven's* setting will react defensively (or outright antagonistically) towards Jack's quixotic endeavors, thwarting them at every step. Such an assumption would, however, be incorrect. Campbell deftly subverts the audience's expectations by showing a certain deal of tolerance and permissiveness towards his hero's unhinged antics.⁵² That being noted, the initial, sanity-conforming half of the narrative can best be summed up as an unrelenting stream of misfortunes;⁵³ these eventually begin to increase in magnitude and intensity, slowly but surely overwhelming the protagonist's capabilities. These events resonate strongly with one of Kurt Vonnegut's story shapes – specifically, the fourth pattern, "From Bad to Worse."⁵⁴ But while the general outline suggested by Vonnegut overlaps structurally with many of the steps in Jack's pre-quixotic journey, the part of the novel that takes place after the protagonist's transformation into the Count does not conform to this conceptual mold. If anything, it begins to resemble the contents of the fifth shape ("Which Way Is Up?") because the increased ambiguity of the roguish narrative makes it exceedingly difficult for the reader to differentiate between good and bad events, and evaluating the long-term consequences of these events becomes

⁵⁰ Campbell, *The Count of Eleven*, 81, 87, 98.

⁵¹ Campbell, 86, 89.

⁵² Certainly far more than Miguel de Cervantes held for Don Quixote and his vainglorious quest. The Spanish author was rather cruel towards his creation, regularly exposing the character to new physical and psychological torments (Nabokov, *Lectures on Don Quixote*, 64).

⁵³ Campbell, *The Count of Eleven*, 28, 53, 101.

⁵⁴ "Kurt Vonnegut Lecture," YouTube, November 19, 2016, educational video, 38:05 to 45:44, <https://youtu.be/oP3c1h8v2ZQ>.

a nigh impossible task. But the Count's perception of the unfolding events does not seem to suffer from such limitations; he is utterly convinced of the infallibility of his luck-manipulating talents, and his enthusiasm in this regard can prove infectious to the novel's audience. What is more, Jack's defeats, although arguably more impactful and psychologically draining than those of his knightly analogue from the pages of Cervantes' novel, are offset and eventually outweighed by his mounting accomplishments – or, at least, that is the narrative employed as a coping mechanism by the character's unhinged mind.⁵⁵

Still, one cannot deny that Orchard becomes a shockingly pragmatic and effective serial killer whose deeds have far reaching sociocultural implications for the country as a whole. The potency of his quixotic paradigm is strong enough to slowly eat away at the system's foundations. And even though there is no actual evidence to support the notion that Jack's numerology-themed atrocities improve his family's welfare, the reader finds himself reevaluating the plausibility of this concept with a surprising degree of regularity. That is because, in some causality and logic-defying way, nearly every instance of the Count's demented roguishness *appears* to make his loved ones' lives slightly better,⁵⁶ and this, in turn, serves to make the audience progressively more receptive – or perhaps more susceptible – to his quixotic reasoning.

This outcome is largely attributable to Campbell's intricate and unconventional approach to character development. When dealing with a protagonist who is unrelatable and/or antipathetic, the narrative treatment highlighted in the previous paragraph can quickly result in the reader's suspension of disbelief becoming strained to the point of breaking.⁵⁷ Campbell aptly circumvents this problem by portraying his protagonist not as an irredeemable monstrosity who feeds on his victims' pain and suffering, but as an amicable everyman who, due to a series of highly improbable and

⁵⁵ Campbell, *The Count of Eleven*, 146.

⁵⁶ Campbell, 144, 167, 180.

⁵⁷ *Suspension of disbelief* can be defined as “the avoidance of critical thinking or logic in examining something unreal or impossible in reality, such as a work of speculative fiction, in order to believe it for the sake of enjoyment” (“Suspension of disbelief,” Wikipedia, accessed November 10, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suspension_of_disbelief). The term was initially coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria*, but the concept itself dates back at least to the times of ancient Greece (William Safire, “On Language: Suspension of Disbelief,” *The New York Times Magazine*, accessed November 20, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/07/magazine/07wlnw-safire-t.html>).

unfortunate events, is forced to watch his life crumble to pieces around him. Jack's circumstances simply go beyond his control, and since his reliance on the values of modesty, honesty, integrity, and hard work does little more than exacerbate the unfavorable situation,⁵⁸ he eventually opts for a different path, resorting to methods that challenge both the Western paradigm's sociocultural tenets and its constraining definition of sanity.⁵⁹ In a desperate bid to save what little remains of his family's good fortune, the protagonist gives rise to the persona of the Count and allows it to take over – or, as Jack remarks on more than one occasion, to look after him and his loved ones.⁶⁰ And once the quixotic journey gets underway, one usually finds it easier to simply continue on the chosen path – after all, “[Y]ou can get used to anything if you're convinced it's necessary.”⁶¹

The Count himself walks through life as if it were played out on a stage – one cluttered with deadly props and in full view of a camera loaded with black-and-white film. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that the situations which he finds himself in often border on the absurd and that many of the bystanders he meets along the way resemble stock slapstick characters. He encounters passive-aggressive clerks,⁶² jumpy secretaries,⁶³ nose-y old ladies,⁶⁴ and other caricatures of the human condition. Mr. Hardy, one of the novel's minor antagonists, is an excellent example of this narrative trend. The character is depicted as an almost exact copy of his namesake from the Laurel and Hardy films. His appearance, mannerisms, and speech patterns all match those of Oliver Hardy's stage persona.⁶⁵ There is one crucial difference that separates Campbell's homage from the original, however – during the former's many interactions with the novel's

⁵⁸ Which sets *The Count of Eleven's* roguish overtones firmly apart from the themes of diligence and dedication usually found in ordinary “rags to riches” narratives (Manuel Peña, *American Mythologies: Semiological Sketches* [Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012], 61).

⁵⁹ As the protagonist accurately points out, “[When] people [feel] themselves to be meaningless..., they [are] capable of anything” (Campbell, *The Count of Eleven*, 191). This notion calls attention both to the unpredictability of the human spirit and to the fact that Jack's fate could have befallen anybody.

⁶⁰ Campbell, 303, 310, 319.

⁶¹ Campbell, 181.

⁶² Campbell, 46, 75.

⁶³ Campbell, 57.

⁶⁴ Campbell, 171, 192.

⁶⁵ Randy Skretvedt, *Laurel & Hardy: The Magic Behind the Movies* (Beverly Hills: Moonstone Press, 1982), 7.

protagonist, he always unwittingly plays the *straight man* to Jack's *funny man*,⁶⁶ trying to maintain his composure while being bombarded with quips.

But this phenomenon is not limited to a handful of characters who look, talk, and act like staple slapstick archetypes. This also applies to the Count's victims, who are frequently drawn into his quixotic narrative without realizing it. One of them follows Jack in a fit of rage, corners the hero in his vehicle, and then is subjected to a surprise reversal –upon opening the door, the protagonist's quixotic alter-ego greets him with a lit blowtorch.⁶⁷ Another victim accidentally drops a heavy item on his extremity and then jumps around in pain, screaming and clenching the injured appendage.⁶⁸ Yet another loses his balance and falls into a large body of water, where he proceeds to yell, splash around, and grope for some sort of lifeline.⁶⁹ On occasion, these situations are even accompanied by a burst of applause or the playing of a theme song.⁷⁰ The sounds in question are not illusory, but the items and occurrences that generate them have no connection to Jack or his actions. This fact, however, does not stop the Count from incorporating such “audio samples” into his grand adventure.

On that note, the specifics of any given quixotic quest might require the one who undertakes it to make use of highly unusual equipment (which, in addition to its comedic value, helps to highlight the peculiarity of the quester's condition). Alonso Quijano had his trusty lance and shield; these items functioned as a natural extension of his knightly delusion.⁷¹ Jack, keeping faithful to his favourite genre of comedy, employs blowlamps. The first of these tools is so large and attention-grabbing that the protagonist buys a pram to transport it less conspicuously from place to place. Even if Jack does not fully realize it, this choice of carriage is undeniably symbolic because the blowlamp that he drives around is the same one that caused his

⁶⁶ It is safe to say that Laurel and Hardy did not adhere to a strict division between these two routines. Other comedy acts did, but, as noted by the duo's employer, “[These two] were both comedians; however, each knew how to play the straight man when the script required it” (Nick Redfern, “Stan Laurel's Eyes,” Research into film, accessed November 13, 2022, <https://nickredfern.wordpress.com/2010/04/22/stan-laurels-eyes/>). And while certain film critics (Skretvedt among them) hold the opposite standpoint, claiming that “Oliver Hardy played straight to Stan Laurel,” they are usually also quick to add that the former “was brilliantly, richly funny in his own right” (Skretvedt, *Laurel & Hardy: The Magic Behind the Movies*, 7).

⁶⁷ Campbell, *The Count of Eleven*, 121.

⁶⁸ Campbell, 174.

⁶⁹ Campbell, 204.

⁷⁰ Campbell, 268.

⁷¹ Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 19.

business to go up in flames⁷² – which essentially means that the blow lamp can be interpreted as a representation of the nascent persona of the Count. The protagonist pushes the embodiment of his quixotic despair around like a proud parent, waiting for the feeling to fully mature.⁷³ And mature it does, as the cumbersome apparatus is eventually replaced with a handheld gas lamp designed for more precise work.⁷⁴ But the metaphorical importance of Jack's decision to switch out the baby carriage for a commuter's briefcase should not be ignored either – the former is an item designed to protect and transport a newly born human being, whereas the latter serves as a stand-in for the stagnation and servility that characterize the archetypical office worker. However, this exchange cannot be classified as an act of paradigmatic submission. On the contrary, it is, in fact, an instance of conceptual deception, a clever ruse employed by the Count – the briefcase, a symbol of conformity to working culture, is used to conceal the very weapon the protagonist wields to destabilize the societal status quo.

There is also a more personal aspect to the two blowlamps. The flames generated by Jack's tools of choice are intimately linked to both of his personalities. It could even be said that Campbell imbues his protagonist with an elemental affinity, forming an interconnection between him and the element of fire. This is evidenced by the way in which the lead perceives the setting – for him it is full of smoke, heat, and soot.⁷⁵ Occasionally, Jack even attempts to find meaning in such imagery,⁷⁶ but he pays it decisively less (conscious) attention than he does to his numerological belief system.⁷⁷ Despite this, it quickly becomes obvious that Jack's inner desperation is, similarly to the blaze generated by a gas lamp, regulated by certain safety mechanisms – although in his case, these features have been structured around parental and civilizational constraints. It is only when its knob and nozzle have been carelessly tampered with by the invisible hand of society that the tool becomes truly dangerous, releasing gusts of all-consuming quixotism.

⁷² Campbell, *The Count of Eleven*, 22.

⁷³ Campbell, 172.

⁷⁴ Campbell, 181.

⁷⁵ Campbell, 190, 239.

⁷⁶ Campbell, 309.

⁷⁷ The narrative also repeatedly mentions the protagonist's inability to swim, as if trying to hint at the fact that, on a metaphysical level, water functions as his opposing element (Campbell, 195, 203, 303).

But what about the Count's protective gear? Admittedly, this point is the most obvious discrepancy between Campbell's lead and Cervantes' knight errant – unlike Don Quixote, Jack's dark twin does not clad himself in armor.⁷⁸ The endeavors of the murderous alter-ego rely chiefly on stealth, so such cumbersome gear would only hinder his movements and draw unwanted attention. Being both consciously and subconsciously aware of this fact, the protagonist falls back on his quixotic paradigm, seemingly weaving the very concepts of luck, unobtrusiveness, and anonymity into a protective garment. Time and again, he asserts that nobody can see the Count, that he is invisible.⁷⁹ The bizarre series of events that serves as the novel's storyline makes it difficult to disagree with Jack's statement, although the exact nature of this "invisibility" is left unexplored by the author. Does it stem from the utter incompetence and predictability of law enforcement?⁸⁰ From the apathy, gullibility, and complacency of the local populace?⁸¹ Or from the sheer potency of the Count's maddened desires? It might even be a mixture of these and various other factors. The reader has to reach their own conclusion, just like in the case of Jack's luck-improving rites.

So, with all of the above information in mind, how is the murderer eventually foiled? How does he receive his comeuppance? While the answer to these questions may prove surprising or even dismaying to readers accustomed to the typical crime stories of the early 90s, it is really quite simple – he does not. Having completed his quest, Jack simply gets on a plane with his family and flies off to Greece for a hard-earned vacation.⁸² But his "success" does come at a price. When the tension finally begins to wind down, glimpses of the protagonist's dark deeds start flooding back into his mind, making him realize that he has reached an existential

⁷⁸ Even so, during one of his confrontations he is forced to take up an impromptu shield (a car door). Moreover, when his opponent (a mechanic) puts on a welding mask and starts threatening him with a lit blowtorch, Jack gives in to another flight of fancy and begins fantasizing about "the Count of Eleven joining combat with the helmeted Black Knight" (Campbell, 237). The scene in question has much in common with Don Quixote's famous duels (Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 546, 885), but one can only speculate whether Campbell really intended to draw such a comparison. On a related note, since the briefcase mentioned in the previous paragraph protects the protagonist's secret identity from the piercing gaze of society's watch hounds, some readers might also perceive it as a shield – at least in a metaphorical sense.

⁷⁹ Campbell, *The Count of Eleven*, 193, 199, 241.

⁸⁰ Campbell, 228.

⁸¹ Campbell, 146.

⁸² Campbell, 293.

crossroads. On the one hand, he is intoxicated by the feeling of control and sense of safety provided by the quixotic alter-ego, which leads him to consider embarking on additional quests.⁸³ On the other, Jack realizes that his unhinged actions have caused the Count to grow in strength, infusing the monstrous personality with enough power and agency to potentially overcome his original identity. Even worse, the protagonist's continued reluctance to relinquish the shadowy twin has drawn it closer "to the family, close enough to lie beside [Jack's wife] in the dark."⁸⁴

Ironically, the opposite holds true for Jack. The main character's efforts to improve the wellbeing of his loved ones have resulted in the deterioration of his familial relationships. Jack's interactions with his spouse are strained,⁸⁵ and his erratic behavior tends to bewilder his daughter.⁸⁶ But the guilt and shame that plague him are not enough to change his rationalization.⁸⁷ Even towards the end of the novel, Jack continues to maintain that his slapstick outbursts are only meant to secure the safety and stability of his family.⁸⁸ The implication that someone else might have laid the groundwork for his "achievements" and that the item which spurred him on in his quest was likely nothing more than a practical joke prove equally ineffective in swaying his conviction.⁸⁹ But when Jack's wife expresses pure hatred towards his murderous alter ego, the sheer strength of her loathing finally manages to penetrate his barrier of denial.⁹⁰ Combined with the realization that he nearly caused the death of a small child,⁹¹ this verbal torrent of negativity prompts him to engage in deep and painful retrospection. He recounts the people he has killed and momentarily succumbs to a feeling of self-disgust.⁹² And while Jack does not outright revoke his quixotic paradigm, he is at least able to come to terms with the fact that in order to truly secure the wellbeing of his family he has to renounce the Count.

⁸³ Campbell, 283.

⁸⁴ Campbell, *The Count of Eleven*, 287.

⁸⁵ Campbell, 168, 211.

⁸⁶ Campbell, 177, 190.

⁸⁷ As one might expect, this alienation undermines his mental state even more. Jack's inability to confide in Julia "[drives] him deeper inside himself" (Campbell, 287), making him more susceptible to the Count's manipulations.

⁸⁸ Campbell, 212, 263.

⁸⁹ Campbell, 288, 304.

⁹⁰ Campbell, 307.

⁹¹ Campbell, 308.

⁹² Campbell, 309.

Yet at the same time Jack is aware that the only way to guarantee the permanence of this solution is to make sure that he will not be able to go back on his decision. Unwilling to let the nightmarish cycle repeat itself and accepting that he cannot trust himself to permanently contain the homicidal urges that reside in his mind, Jack decides to resolve the issue in a way that is as effective as it is extreme – he opts to kill the dream by killing the dreamer. Jack rents a plastic canoe, pedals out into the middle of the sea, and, having ensured that his chances of being rescued are close to nonexistent, kicks the boat away. Shortly afterwards, staying true to the notion that apícaro's story concludes at the same moment as their life,⁹³ the narrative draws to a close. Yet this outcome should not be perceived as a defeat on the part of the protagonist. By throwing both himself and the Count at the mercy of the waves, Jack turns his weakness – the previously mentioned inability to swim – into a trump card which helps him to permanently vanquish the beast residing in his head. Moreover, Jack's passing is peaceful, (fairly) dignified, and occurs on his own terms,⁹⁴ which is more than can be said about the dispassionate – some might even say cruel – send off given by Cervantes to his knight errant.⁹⁵ The conclusion of Jack's quest against mundane reality does not leave him broken and bedridden. He does not denounce his actions, bow down to the system that he chose to challenge, or beg its representatives for forgiveness. And while many of his deeds might have been pointless, misguided, or even outright monstrous, his last act is one of true accomplishment.

In conclusion, although *The Count of Eleven* does not fulfil all of the requirements which would make it possible to classify it as picaresque on a structural level, the concepts it contains synergize almost perfectly with those of the picaresque myth – both with its classic aspects, whose roots can be traced back to sixteenth-century Spain, and with the slightly newer ones, which have entrenched themselves in popular culture thanks to the creative output of twentieth-century English-speaking writers. Ramsey Campbell's protagonist, a postmodern amalgamation of roguishness and quixotism, serves as the focal point for all these elements. Jack's mischievous attitude mixes seamlessly with his surreal perception of the world, paving the way for an ideological clash between personal myth and

⁹³ Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 169.

⁹⁴ Campbell, *The Count of Eleven*, 319.

⁹⁵ Nabokov, *Lectures on Don Quixote*, 98.

systemic oppression. Indeed, the Count's many escapades are not unlike a Baroque *mise en abyme*; they create the impression of a never-ending loop, moving deeper and deeper, time and again spiraling from timid compliance towards reckless, system-destabilizing feats. And, just like a mirror image, these fictional feats cause the reader to take a conceptual "step back," causing them to question not only the peculiarities of the medium and the narrative, but also the nature (and alleged normalcy) of their daily experiences. Furthermore, in terms of its scope, richness, and complexity – or simply baroque-ness – the conflict of paradigms Campbell portrays nearly rivals those delineated in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, and the same remark could be made about the leading characters of the two stories. But Campbell's murderous tale is unique in its own right. The writer is not content with simply poking fun at the West's civilizational shortcomings. Instead, inadvertently channeling the tenets of the postmodernist literary tradition, he carries out a grand, norm-defying amalgamation of seemingly incompatible tropes, archetypes, and genres, employing the concepts of roguery and quixotism as explorative tools meant to shed light on the many dangers and challenges posed by today's society. Such observations point to the timelessness of the literary concepts employed in *The Count of Eleven* and showcase their tendency to continuously reappear in different kinds of narratives and media types. And while the picaresque can no longer be considered a prominent facet of contemporary prose, the archetype of the pícaro, thanks to its uncanny talent for conceptual adaptation, has been able to secure a permanent place for itself in the Western mediascape.

Oskar Zasada

Abstract

Ramsey Campbell, whose illustrious writing career began as a result of being introduced to the eldritch works of H.P. Lovecraft, is frequently referred to as one of the most prolific authors in the field of British horror. However, the motifs, literary structures, and character archetypes found in his writings often stem from other genres. With this background in mind, this article undertakes a critical analysis of *The Count of Eleven*, one of Campbell's best-known works, through a dual spectrum of picaresque traditions and quixotic mentalities. The initial aim of this process is to assess the depth and breadth of the conceptual interconnections that exist between Campbell's novel and Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* – one of the cornerstones of pícaro-focused storytelling. This will allow for an estimation of the effectiveness with which the British writer employs picaresque ideas to achieve narrative goals usually associated with works of horror and social commentaries. It will also provide insight into the current pop and sociocultural relevance of the literary concepts discussed and about the validity of the pícaro archetype in the contemporary Western mediascape.

Keywords: picaresque, quixotism, postmodern novel, slapstick comedy, Ramsey Campbell

Słowa kluczowe: pikareska, donkiszoteria, powieść postmodernistyczna, komedia slapstickowa, Ramsey Campbell