

Title	<i>The Doubtful Guest</i>				
Author (Text & Illustration)	Edward Gorey				
Publication Year	1957	Publisher	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt		
Translated Versions	Japanese translation available				
Words	260	Pages	48	YL Level	N/A
Synopsis					
<p>The story is set in a Victorian-style mansion, somewhere from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. One winter's day, a strange visitor comes from nowhere. It is small and black with an unrecognizable face. It is difficult to tell whether it's a human, an animal, or an alien, but readers will find its appearance to be startling. As soon as it enters the house, the guest presses its nose against the wall and refuses to move, not listening to whatever the people in the house say. It eats the dishes, breaks the gramophone, tears books, and hides towels when it gets angry. Seventeen years eventually pass, but the guest is still there.</p>					
Introduction					
<p>"The Doubtful Guest," based on the cover, is apparently wearing Converse sneakers and a striped scarf like the ones that Harvard students wear, fluttering in the wind. What in the world is it? It could be a human or even an animal like a penguin or pelican. It could be an adult or a child. If it is a human, what is its race? Its nationality? The women in the mansion wear long dresses, reminiscent of the nineteenth century, but if that's true, is the "Doubtful Guest" in Converse sneakers an intruder from the future? Given that Gorey himself was a Harvard graduate who loved sneakers, is it his alter ego? In any case, this is a picture book with many mysteries. The illustrations, drawn only as black line art on a white background, are robotic, and the people have no facial expressions. Therefore, it leaves a lot of room for the reader's interpretations. When I read it in class, the students seemed very puzzled in the beginning.</p> <p>Nevertheless, after reading the book several times, the doubtful guest starts to look cute. The movement of its little eyeballs faintly conveys the creature's changing emotions. Here is one of my interpretations of its expression as I read the book. The guest, who visited the past from the author Gorey's present (the book was published in 1957), peered into the mansion with curiosity at first, but the reaction of the family makes it regret visiting. However, its curiosity returns the next morning, and it begins to meddle with things that no longer exist in the modern world (gramophones, chimneys, old books and paintings, etc.). However, it eventually begins to become mentally ill, leading to bouts of rage and the symptoms of sleepwalking. Unable to return to the future, the guest stays for 17 years, just sitting still in a state of resignation and emotional dullness.</p> <p>There is no doubt that the "Doubtful Guest" is a representation of being different from one's surroundings. If you use it in class, you might want to ask students about what kind of otherness</p>					

they think it represents. Some students may think of racial issues, while others may think of immigration issues. The most familiar issue to students may be bullying. Or perhaps the theme of alienation and loneliness that comes from the fact that the present self has become disconnected from the past self. The gap Gorey describes between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries may be viewed by modern readers as resembling the gap between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The possibilities for interpretation are endless, but if we ask learners to present and compare each reading, we can explore a variety of readings from a picture book of only 150 words.

#### Related work/Reference URL

[Other recommended picture books by Edward Gorey]

- *The Bug Book* (Japanese translation available)
- *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1997) (Japanese translation available)
- *The Hapless Child* (Thames & Hudson, 2017) (Japanese translation available)
- *The Loathsome Couple* (Peter Weed, 1986) (Japanese translation available)

There are other picture books as well. The following are collections of his works.

- *Amphigorey; Fifteen Books* (Tarcher Perigee, 1980)
- *Amphigorey Too* (Tarcher Perigee, 1980)
- *Amphigorey Also* (Mariner Books, 1993)
- *Amphigorey Again* (Mariner Books, 2007)

[Others]

Gorey's work has been adapted as puppet shows several times by the Hitomiza Puppet Theater.

Those interested can find performance information on the following website.

<http://hitomiza.com/news/000449.html>

(Text: Motoko Fukaya)