



Civilization in Nihilistic Miniature: A Conceptual Metaphor and Proppian Reading of Thomas Ligotti's *The Town Manager*

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ABSTRACT: This article reads Thomas Ligotti's *The Town Manager* as a compressed model of civilization. Rather than treating the story only as a grotesque account of arbitrary authority, it argues that the town functions as a reduced social world in which administration, institutional continuity, labour, spatial reorganisation, and spectacle become legible. The analysis combines Conceptual Metaphor Theory with Vladimir Propp's morphological approach to narrative. The first framework clarifies how the town operates as a concrete source domain through which broader civilizational processes can be understood. The second shows how the plot adopts a recognisable sequence of disturbance, search, succession, transformation, and apparent escape, only to refuse folktale restoration through universality and recruitment. The disappearance of one manager does not create the possibility of liberation. It prepares the arrival of another, the further reorganisation of the town, and finally the narrator's recruitment into the system itself. The story thus emerges as a nihilistic miniature of civilization: a world in which order is neither rational nor redemptive, but durable, adaptive, and self-reproducing. By bringing conceptual metaphor into dialogue with narrative morphology, the article shows that Ligotti produces systemic horror not only through atmosphere or philosophical suggestion, but through the formal organisation of setting, sequence, and recurrence.

KEYWORDS: civilization, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, narrative morphology, nihilism, systemic horror, *The Town Manager*, Thomas Ligotti, Vladimir Propp.

I. INTRODUCTION

Thomas Ligotti's fiction is usually discussed in relation to philosophical pessimism, anti-humanism, and forms of horror that exceed conventional supernatural terror. That emphasis is justified, but it can leave structural questions underdeveloped. In some of Ligotti's stories, horror does not arise from worldview alone. It is generated

by the way a narrative arranges authority, space, action, and repetition. *The Town Manager* is especially revealing in this regard. Set in a decaying town ruled by a succession of obscure administrators, the story shows how social life can become legible as a mechanism. Its force lies as much in the disciplined construction of a small civic world as in grotesque detail.

This article argues that *The Town Manager* presents a microcosmic narrative model of civilization. The term refers to a reduced and bounded environment through which the dynamics of a wider system can be observed with unusual clarity. Ligotti's town is not simply a backdrop, and it is not best approached as a loose allegory. It functions as an analytic miniature. Within this miniature, authority survives as procedure, institutions persist in damaged form, labour is reassigned by outside command, public space is repeatedly reconfigured, and economic life is converted into spectacle. Civilization therefore appears here less as refinement or progress than as management, adaptation, depletion, and renewal.

The town's importance is conceptual before it is symbolic. Rather than treating it as a static emblem for "society", this study approaches it as a structured source domain through which abstract systemic relations become intelligible. Conceptual Metaphor Theory is especially useful at this point. Since Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, metaphor has been understood not only as rhetorical ornament but as a basic cognitive mechanism through which abstract domains are grasped via more concrete and experientially available ones (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Later work has refined this model by emphasising embodiment, discourse, context, and culture, while retaining its explanatory force (Kövecses, 2015; Semino & Demjén, 2017). In political and institutional discourse, metaphor can also develop into scenario-like structures that shape the perception of authority, crisis, and collective life (Musolff, 2004, 2016). These insights make it



possible to read Ligotti's story as a narrative world organised by systematic metaphorical relations.

From this perspective, the town becomes the concrete domain through which civilization is imagined in compressed form. The manager corresponds to governing authority; the charter to inherited legitimacy; the built environment to institutional order; civic projects to ideological programmes; and the townspeople to populations subject to decisions they neither initiate nor meaningfully contest. The details of the story support this model. The extinguished lamp marks the lapse of authority in a visible ritual form. The compulsory search for each missing manager turns obedience into inherited procedure. The directive "DUSTROY TROLY" reduces governance to command without explanation. Later, the conversion of the town into "Funny Town" recasts community as commodity and labour as performance, while the ending shows that the system ultimately reproduces itself by recruiting those it has already damaged (Ligotti, 2008).

Conceptual Metaphor Theory clarifies how the story models civilization, but it does not fully explain how that model unfolds through sequence. *The Town Manager* is not a static tableau. It moves through disappearance, search, replacement, transformation, departure, and final encounter. To account for that movement, this article also draws on Vladimir Propp's morphology of narrative. Propp's value here lies not in providing a rigid template for all stories, but in identifying functions: recurrent action-positions whose structural role persists even when agents, motives, and settings change (Propp, 1968). This is particularly useful in Ligotti's case, where the "town manager" is less an individuated character than a recurring role, and where the narrator matters less as a psychologically dense protagonist than as a position through which the reader experiences the town's mutations.

Read through this lens, *The Town Manager* resembles a distorted folktale sequence. A disturbance occurs when the manager disappears and the lamp goes out. A search follows, but it is ritual rather than quest. A new authority arrives, yet instead of repairing the town it deepens instability and extends control. The protagonist eventually departs, in a movement that might suggest escape or transformation, but no restorative end follows. The same logic reappears elsewhere, and the final encounter converts what might have been resolution into recruitment. Ligotti therefore preserves recognisable functional positions while suspending their usual telos. The result is an anti-restorative narrative.

This structural pattern is central to the story's nihilism. *The Town Manager* does not simply suggest that authority is arbitrary or that society is absurd. It shows how systems persist without requiring either intelligibility or moral legitimacy. They continue because offices can be refilled, spaces can be repurposed, labour can be redirected, and damaged subjects can be drawn back into the machinery of control. The horror of the story lies not only in domination, and not only in decay. It lies in continuity.

The study therefore has two related aims. First, it argues that Conceptual Metaphor Theory provides a rigorous account of how Ligotti's town functions as a cognitive model of civilization rather than as a general symbol. Second, it shows that Proppian morphology explains why this model acquires narrative force: the story borrows the sequential grammar of quest and transformation while cancelling their restorative end-point. These frameworks are not mechanically combined. They illuminate different aspects of the same formal operation. Metaphor explains how the story thinks; morphology explains how it moves.

Methodologically, the article proceeds through close reading of the story's main structural moments: the disappearance of the manager, the extinguished lamp, the ritual search, the succession of directives, the destruction of the trolley, the remaking of the town as a spectacle economy, the narrator's departure, and the recruiter's final offer. These moments are analysed both as textual events and as nodes within a wider conceptual system. The claim is not that Ligotti encoded a stable theoretical scheme, but that the story becomes more critically legible when examined through these two frameworks.

This reading contributes to Ligotti scholarship by shifting attention from philosophical declaration to formal mechanism. It also speaks to metaphor theory by showing how an entire story-world can function as a source domain, and to narrative theory by showing how modern weird fiction can adopt folktale positions while stripping them of restoration. The argument of the article is therefore straightforward: *The Town Manager* presents civilization as a nihilistic miniature, a reduced world in which management persists, forms mutate, and continuity survives every apparent break. The following section turns first to metaphor as a cognitive and narrative mechanism before considering the relevance of Proppian morphology in greater detail.



II. METAPHOR BETWEEN RHETORIC AND COGNITION: CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

The argument advanced in this article requires a theory of metaphor that can account for narrative modelling. A purely rhetorical understanding is not enough. If metaphor is treated only as ornamental language, then the town in *The Town Manager* can be described at most as a suggestive image or symbolic embellishment. That does not explain why the story's civic environment is so systematically organised, why its institutions remain legible even in decay, or why the plot's transformations carry conceptual force beyond atmosphere. For that reason, the present reading adopts a cognitive account of metaphor rather than a narrowly rhetorical one.

This distinction matters because literary texts do not always use metaphor only at the level of phrasing. In traditional rhetoric, metaphor is often defined as a figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms belonging properly to another (Huszka et al., 2024). That account still has value when one is dealing with local expression, emphasis, or vividness. It becomes less helpful, however, when a story constructs an entire fictional world that behaves like a model of a more abstract process. In such cases, metaphor is distributed across setting, roles, institutions, and action. The question is not only how something is said, but how a narrative arranges experience so that one domain becomes intelligible through another.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory provides the most influential account of this broader understanding. Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphor is fundamental to thought because people regularly understand abstract domains through more concrete, embodied, and experientially available ones (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Their intervention shifted attention away from metaphor as poetic deviation and towards metaphor as conceptual mapping. Within this framework, metaphor is not primarily a decorative feature of language. It is a patterned relation between a source domain and a target domain. The source domain is usually more concrete, spatially graspable, or materially familiar. The target domain is usually more abstract and less directly available. Such mappings matter because they shape perception, inference, evaluation, and judgement. Metaphor, in other words, has explanatory force (Huszka et al., 2025).

For literary analysis, one consequence is especially important. A narrative may be organised so that an entire fictional environment functions as a source domain. The relevant question then becomes

not whether the text contains metaphorical expressions, but whether the world of the text is itself metaphorically structured (Huszka et al., 2026). This is the case in *The Town Manager*. The town is not merely a background for philosophical pessimism, and it is not simply a stylised setting of administrative absurdity. It is a bounded and concrete domain through which a wider social order becomes thinkable. The story does not merely assert that civilization is oppressive or decayed. It builds a town in which authority, compliance, infrastructural change, labour allocation, spatial reorganisation, and institutional continuity can be observed in reduced form. In that sense, the town functions as a source domain for the target domain of civilization.

This formulation also helps explain why the term *microcosmic narrative model* is preferable to looser terms such as *allegory* or *symbol*. An allegorical reading can flatten the story into a set of fixed correspondences. A symbolic reading often remains too static, since it may identify the town as an emblem of society without explaining how the narrative produces meaning through change over time. A metaphorical model offers greater flexibility. It allows for systematic correspondence without requiring rigid equivalence, and it makes room for process, mutation, and sequence. The town does not simply stand for civilization. It models civilizational dynamics by making them narratively operational.

Later work in metaphor studies strengthens this approach. Kövecses argues that metaphorical meaning arises not from abstract mappings alone, but from the interaction between conceptual structure and contextual pressure (Kövecses, 2015). Semino and Demjén similarly emphasise the importance of discourse and usage in shaping metaphorical meaning (Semino & Demjén, 2017). Musolff's work on political metaphor is also relevant here because it shows how metaphor can develop into broader scenarios that organise perceptions of authority, crisis, and collective life (Musolff, 2004, 2016). These refinements are especially useful for reading Ligotti. The town is not an empty cognitive frame into which social meaning is poured. It is a deteriorating and historically burdened environment. Its vestigial charter, repeated successions of managers, obligatory searches, externally imposed projects, and later conversion into a grotesque attraction-space all constrain the inferences available to the reader. Civilization is not conceptualised here in terms of civic harmony, legal transparency, or shared purpose. It is conceptualised through management, command, adaptation, depletion, and reconfiguration.



At the centre of this system stands one dominant mapping: CIVILIZATION IS A TOWN. From that primary relation, a wider set of correspondences follows. The town manager becomes governing authority. The townspeople become the population. The charter becomes inherited legitimacy. Infrastructure becomes institutional order. Civic projects become ideological programmes. The restructuring of space becomes the restructuring of social life. These correspondences are not arbitrary. They are grounded in the story's repeated emphasis on inherited compliance, routine adaptation, and decisions imposed from above. The town is presented as a place managed across generations by plans that its inhabitants do not formulate and barely understand. The miniature is therefore not decorative. It is structural.

Once this primary mapping is recognised, further metaphorical patterns come into view. The first concerns the nature of power. In the story, authority does not appear as deliberation, representation, or law in any robust sense. It appears as directive. Orders arrive in scraps of writing, clumsy in form yet fully effective in consequence. The instruction "DUSTROY TROLY" (Ligotti, 2008) is exemplary because it reduces governance to command without explanation. What matters is not rational persuasion but enforceable utterance. This allows the later analysis to formulate a second mapping: POWER IS ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTIVE. The phrase is useful because it captures the story's steady reduction of politics to command, compliance, and execution. The later mutilation associated with that order then exposes the violence hidden within apparently administrative language.

A second cluster of metaphors emerges when the town is transformed into "Funny Town". At that point, buildings are repurposed, jobs are altered, and the inhabitants themselves are drawn into new forms of staged labour. The effect is not merely surreal. Social life is reorganised as display. Commerce becomes spectacle, civic space becomes exhibition, and work becomes performance. In this phase of the narrative, one may speak of a further mapping: SOCIETY IS A SPECTACLE ECONOMY. This should not be understood as a free-floating slogan imposed from outside the text. It is a way of naming what the story makes concrete when communal life is re-scripted around attraction, managed experience, and extraction. The town is not abandoned by economic activity. It is reformatted into a more exploitative and dehumanising mode of it.

A further point follows from this. Conceptual metaphors are often discussed as relatively stable mappings, but narrative fiction rarely leaves them static. Stories test them, extend them, and force them through temporal sequence. They do not simply contain metaphors; they make metaphors unfold. This is one reason metaphor theory must be used with attention to plot. In *The Town Manager*, the metaphorical model of civilization becomes legible through successive changes in authority, labour, space, and form. Authority disappears, is replaced, issues commands, reorganises the town, and finally reproduces itself through recruitment. By the end of the story, the most powerful implication is that social systems do not merely govern subjects; they turn subjects into future operators of the same order. The final metaphor that emerges is therefore this: SOCIAL SYSTEMS ARE SELF-REPRODUCING MACHINES. The deepest horror of the story lies not in a single abuse of power, but in continuation.

This point also clarifies why the story should not be reduced to a simple satire of bureaucracy. Satire usually presupposes some norm against which distortion can be measured. Ligotti's narrative is harsher than that. It does not present a basically intelligible social order corrupted by a few bad managers, nor does it imply that the replacement of one directive with a better one would restore justice. Instead, it suggests that systemic life is constituted by replacement, adaptation, and continuity through mutation. Individual managers matter less than the role they occupy. What persists is the structure. Metaphor theory is particularly useful here because it explains how the story makes that abstraction perceptible. The town is the small mechanism through which a larger logic becomes visible.

For the purposes of the present article, four methodological consequences follow. First, metaphor will be treated as a conceptual and narrative mechanism, not merely as a local stylistic flourish. Second, the town will be analysed as a structured source domain through which civilization is modelled in reduced form. Third, attention will be given to the way narrative sequence activates and modifies metaphorical mappings rather than simply illustrating them. Fourth, the close reading will concentrate on those moments where the model becomes most explicit: the extinguished lamp, the ritual search, the command to destroy the trolley, the conversion of occupations and spaces, and the concluding offer of managerial recruitment. The aim is not to impose an external scheme on the story, but to show how the story's own formal economy



produces conceptual clarity through grotesque reduction.

This theoretical position prepares the next step of the argument. If metaphor explains how the town can function as a cognitive model of civilization, it does not yet explain why that model unfolds through a sequence of disturbance,

III. NARRATIVE MORPHOLOGY AND ANTI-RESTORATIVE SEQUENCING

If Conceptual Metaphor Theory explains how *The Town Manager* constructs a reduced model of civilization, it does not fully explain how that model unfolds in time. Ligotti's story is not organised as a static arrangement of symbols. It moves through a patterned sequence in which absence, response, succession, transformation, departure, and renewed incorporation become structurally linked. Meaning therefore emerges not only from what the town signifies, but from the order in which its events occur and from the expectations that this order first invites and then defeats. For that reason, the present study supplements metaphor theory with a second framework: Vladimir Propp's morphology of narrative.

Propp remains useful because he shifts attention from character as personality to function as structural role. In *Morphology of the Folktale*, his central claim is that narratives can be analysed through recurrent action-positions rather than through surface motifs alone (Propp, 1968; Haji Sulaiman et al., 2025). That distinction is especially valuable here. *The Town Manager* does not depend on richly individuated psychology. Its force lies in patterned roles and repeated actions: a vacancy appears, a search is undertaken, a successor arrives, the town is altered, the narrator leaves, and a final encounter reveals that nothing fundamental has been escaped. In such a narrative, morphology offers sharper leverage than character criticism.

This does not mean that Ligotti is writing a folktale in modern disguise. Such a claim would be too blunt. The story belongs more clearly to weird fiction and philosophical horror than to folklore as genre. Even so, Propp's model can still be used comparatively. What carries over is not the folktale as a historical form, but the idea that certain narrative positions recur across very different texts. The task, then, is not to force exact equivalence, but to ask which functional positions remain recognisable in Ligotti's story and how their consequences have been changed. That is where the section's main claim begins: *The Town Manager* preserves the outline of a quest-structured sequence while stripping it of restoration.

substitution, degradation, departure, and return. For that, a second framework is needed: narrative morphology. The following section therefore turns to Propp, not in order to classify Ligotti's story as a folktale, but in order to show how *The Town Manager* adopts recognisable functional positions while stripping them of restorative force.

That point matters because classical folktale structure is usually teleological. A lack, injury, or disturbance sets events in motion so that the narrative can move toward repair. The process may involve hardship, trial, delay, or disguise, but the general direction is still toward settlement. Ligotti borrows the outer grammar of such movement, yet withholds its end. In his story, functions remain legible while their telos is reversed. The result is not simply a dark folktale or a failed quest. It is a deliberately anti-restorative sequence.

The opening movement already establishes the story's anti-restorative logic. The town exists within a diminished but intelligible administrative order, one marked by the office of the manager and by the lamp that is expected to remain lit while his tenure continues. When that sign fails, the townspeople do not respond with immediate certainty. They first hesitate, consider ordinary explanations, and only then verify that the darkness is not accidental. Once this has been confirmed, the meaning of the event becomes clear to everyone: the manager's tenure is over, and succession is already underway. In Proppian terms, this is a moment of absence or lack, since a governing role has fallen vacant and the community must respond. Yet Ligotti renders that response ritual rather than restorative from the outset. The search that follows is not undertaken in the expectation of recovery, but as an inherited procedure within a system that treats disappearance as one more stage in continuity.

In a folktale, such a disturbance would usually open the possibility of meaningful action. A problem appears, and the narrative moves toward remedy. Ligotti retains the position of disturbance, but hollows out its promise. The townspeople do search for the missing manager, yet they do so without belief that he will be found. The narrator states plainly that this has never happened before. The search is therefore not an effort aimed at discovery. It is a required performance carried out because the charter demands it. In structural terms, a quest-function survives, but its purpose has collapsed. Movement remains. Hope does not.

This is one of the story's decisive formal operations. The search has the outward shape of collective agency, yet it lacks inward conviction. The inhabitants go through the motions. They inspect the



town and its environs. They perform the expected sequence. They prepare to report that they made an effort. None of this restores anything. Morphologically, then, the story keeps a recognisable action-position while emptying it of its heroic horizon. The quest has become procedure. That is why the opening already announces the anti-restorative logic of the whole story.

This deformation also affects the place of the protagonist. In folktales, the narrative often gathers around a hero whose movement through the sequence gives it coherence. Ligotti diffuses that role. The townspeople act collectively, but only within compliance. The narrator sees, remembers, and later departs, but he never becomes a redemptive agent. He occupies a position in the sequence without mastering it. Propp's distinction between person and function is useful for exactly this reason. It allows us to say that heroic positions may still be structurally present even when no true hero emerges from them. The story contains search without heroism and departure without liberation.

The arrival of the new manager sharpens the inversion. In many traditional narratives, a newly appearing figure may guide, test, reward, or help to stabilise the disturbed world. In Ligotti's story, each replacement does the opposite. The successor does not repair what has been damaged. He introduces another phase of rearrangement. Existing structures are removed. Civic life is pushed into a new form. Work is redirected. The town becomes subject to further manipulation. The authority-position therefore remains central, but its function changes. Instead of mediating resolution, it produces another round of instability.

At this point, morphology helps clarify something that metaphor theory alone cannot show. Earlier, the town was described as a miniature model of civilization. Morphology explains how this model becomes dynamic. Each intervention by the manager occupies a place in the narrative sequence that might elsewhere support development or mastery. Here, the same position supports managed deterioration. Change does occur, but it does not lead upward. It reveals a system that survives by altering its surface. Transformation remains necessary to the structure, yet it becomes anti-redemptive in effect.

The destruction of the trolley is a particularly clear instance of this pattern. In many narratives, transport can signify access, movement, or threshold-crossing. Here it becomes the object of arbitrary command. The written order to destroy it carries no explanation, only force. When the mutilated body of Carnes is found inside the trolley, the sequence makes its lesson unmistakable:

administration can reorganise the town through terror, and it need not justify itself to do so. Structurally, this is important because an event that might otherwise mark transition or advance is converted into exemplary violence. The town is altered, but the alteration equips no one for freedom.

One can also see here why Propp must be used flexibly rather than dogmatically. It would not be very helpful to match every scene with a numbered function and pretend the problem were solved. What matters is the broader structural effect. A scene of change remains in place, yet the usual pedagogical or restorative consequence disappears. Nothing is learned that could repair the initial disturbance. No enabling knowledge is gained. No tool, helper, or revelation sets the protagonist on a path toward mastery. Instead, the sequence demonstrates that command alone is enough to reshape social reality.

The later remaking of the town into "Funny Town" extends the same logic. In a more conventional tale, intensified transformation might produce wonder, elevation, or some new access to value. Ligotti preserves the escalation while changing its meaning. The town is reformatted as attraction-space. Commerce becomes staged spectacle. The inhabitants are absorbed into performative labour. Buildings no longer anchor ordinary civic life; they serve managed display. Morphologically, this phase occupies the place where narrative enlargement might promise marvel. Instead, it yields degradation in a brighter form. The structure advances, but the world does not improve.

Departure must also be reconsidered in this light. In Proppian and related traditions, leaving the initial world often opens narrative possibility. The protagonist enters a wider field, encounters danger, and gains what is needed for return or transcendence. *The Town Manager* briefly appears to offer such an opening when the narrator leaves town. This is the point at which an outside might become available. Ligotti closes that possibility almost at once. The narrator discovers that other places are managed according to the same principles. Departure therefore ceases to function as escape. It becomes a revelation that the system extends beyond the local setting.

This is a crucial turning point in the story's morphology. Once the outside is cancelled, the town can no longer be read as an isolated grotesque. It becomes representative. The miniature proves scalable. What looked like a bounded site of weird administration is revealed as a local instance of a wider order. That is why the failure of departure matters so much. It converts a narrative movement usually associated with expansion into proof of



universality. The plot has somewhere to go spatially, but nowhere to go structurally.

The final encounter with the recruiter completes the anti-restorative pattern. In many traditional narratives, the end brings recognition, accession, or some newly legitimate status. Ligotti echoes that position, but only to poison it. A figure appears. The protagonist is addressed directly. A future role is offered. Formally, this resembles culmination. Functionally, it is recruitment into the very order that generated the story's horror. The offered position is not reward. It is incorporation.

This ending is what justifies the phrase *anti-folktale cycle*. The story does not merely terminate without comfort. It converts closure into recurrence. The protagonist is not restored to an order made just. He is placed on the threshold of becoming one of its future operators. That reversal matters because it changes the meaning of everything that came before it. The initial disturbance was never the beginning of repair. The search was never the first step toward truth. The transformations were never stages on the way to completion. Each movement belonged instead to a system that renews itself through succession.

Seen in this way, the story's nihilism is inseparable from plot logic. Its bleakness does not arise only from grotesque imagery or from philosophical pessimism stated at the level of theme.

IV. THE TOWN AS MICROCOSMIC NARRATIVE MODEL OF CIVILIZATION

Section IV turns from theoretical framing to close reading. Its task is to show how the story's civic details make the town function as a reduced model of civilization. What matters here is not only that the town can be interpreted symbolically, but that its institutions, routines, and spatial changes render larger systemic relations visible in compressed form. The analysis therefore begins with the opening sequence, where authority is recognised through the failure of a familiar sign and where procedural obedience persists despite the obscurity of its purpose.

a. The Disappearance of Authority and Ritualised Obedience

The analytical logic of *The Town Manager* begins with a sign rather than an announcement. The first indication that something is wrong is not a proclamation, a witness statement, or a formal investigation, but the fact that the lamp in the manager's office is no longer lit. Ligotti is careful with this sequence. The townspeople do not begin with certainty. They delay, speculate, and consider ordinary explanations such as a burned-out bulb or an electrical fault. Only after the office is entered and the

It arises from a sequence that repeatedly awakens the expectation of progress and then converts that expectation into evidence of continuity. Narrative itself becomes the vehicle of systemic horror. The deepest claim of the story is therefore severe: social systems do not need legitimacy in order to persist. They need only replacement, adaptation, and selection.

For that reason, Proppian morphology is indispensable to the present study so long as it is used with restraint. The point is not to force *The Town Manager* into a rigid catalogue. The point is to identify a set of structural positions that remain visible and then to show what Ligotti does to them. Disturbance remains. Search remains. Authority remains. Departure remains. Final encounter remains. What disappears is restoration. In its place stands a logic of renewal through turnover.

This anti-restorative sequence prepares the analytical core of the article. Once the formal pattern has been clarified, it becomes possible to examine more closely how particular scenes make the town function as a microcosmic model of civilization. The next section therefore turns from theoretical framing to close reading, beginning with the disappearance of authority and ritualised obedience, then moving to administrative command, coercive transformation, and the final disclosure of systemic self-reproduction.

lamp is tested does the darkness acquire its proper meaning within the town's inherited code. At that point the conclusion becomes collective: the manager has gone, and succession is already underway.

This opening matters because it defines authority not through legitimacy, but through legibility. The townspeople do not know who appoints the manager, by what principle he rules, or from where each successor arrives. What they possess instead is a sign-system. As long as the lamp remains lit, tenure continues. When the lamp goes dark, tenure is understood to have ended. Authority in the story is therefore grasped through a visible marker that is simple, local, and materially concrete. Ligotti reduces administration to an office, a desk, and a light, but that reduction does not weaken the institution. It makes its operation easier to perceive. The story thus offers a compact image of political order in which continuity is experienced through signs and routines rather than through explanation or consent.

The force of this sign is strengthened by the history attached to it. The lamp belongs to a longer sequence of illuminated administrative sites. Earlier, civic authority had been associated with the chandelier in the old town hall; later, it was signalled



from the opera house; now it survives in the dim light of a storefront office. What persists across these changes is not institutional grandeur, but the need to make authority publicly perceptible. At the same time, the movement from chandelier to lamp registers obvious contraction. Public administration has not disappeared, yet it has lost scale, dignity, and architectural weight. This matters because the story's decay is not mere atmosphere. The shrinking of civic form is part of the model. Civilization appears here as an exhausted order whose structures continue in diminished shape long after their original basis has thinned out.

Once the disappearance is confirmed, the town responds in the only way it knows: it conducts a search. At first sight this looks like collective agency. On closer inspection, it is the opposite. The narrator states that no missing manager has ever been found, alive or dead, once the office light has gone out. The search is therefore undertaken without real expectation of success. The townspeople go through the town, then the surrounding countryside, while openly acknowledging that they cannot even pretend to be careful searchers. Their actual aim is modest and procedural. They want to be able to tell the incoming manager that they made an effort. The search is thus not directed toward discovery. It is directed toward compliance.

This is one of the story's central formal moves. The outward form of inquiry remains in place, but its purpose has drained away. The search still exists as an action, yet it no longer functions as an attempt to know or recover. Ligotti's wording makes this unmistakable: the townspeople are "going through the motions" (Ligotti, 2008), and they know it. The ritual continues because the structure requires that it continue. In social terms, procedure has detached itself from meaningful end. In narrative terms, a quest-position survives after its teleology has collapsed. That is why the opening sequence is so important for the article's broader argument. It shows, from the start, that the town reproduces authority not because it understands authority, but because it has inherited the forms through which authority is recognised and obeyed.

The town charter sharpens this point. When Leeman questions why they bother searching at all, the narrator refers him to the charter's requirement of "a fair search of the town and its environs" (Ligotti, 2008). Yet even this document is precarious. It survives only in fragmentary notes assembled from recollection and lore, while the fuller records once stored in the opera house have been lost. The legal basis of the system is therefore weak in textual terms, but still binding in social terms. This is crucial.

Ligotti is not depicting a community held together by a transparent constitutional order. He is depicting one held together by half-preserved rules whose authority rests on repetition more than on intelligibility. The charter does not ground obedience in any robust sense. It transmits obedience across time.

The conversation during the search also reveals a limit that the townspeople cannot cross. As they move through the countryside, they briefly imagine confronting the next manager and asking why the search is required. They even speak of a more enlightened era. Yet by the time they reach the ruined farmhouse, those resolutions have dissolved. No direct prohibition is needed. Intention simply weakens as the threshold of succession approaches. This is an important detail because it shows that obedience in the story is not only behavioural. It reaches into expectation itself. The inhabitants can complain, speculate, and exchange suspicions among themselves, but they cannot sustain inquiry at the point where inquiry would matter. The structure governs not only what they do, but what they can continue wanting to do.

Seen in conceptual terms, the opening sequence establishes the first major mapping of the article: CIVILIZATION IS A TOWN. The manager corresponds to the absent centre of rule; the lamp to the visible sign of institutional continuity; the charter to inherited legitimacy in weakened form; and the search to the rituals by which populations reproduce systems they do not control. The story therefore begins not with chaos, but with ordered obscurity. What is frightening is not the collapse of structure. It is the endurance of structure under conditions where explanation, justification, and confidence have already eroded. The town functions as a miniature because its reduced scale makes this logic unusually clear.

For that reason, the disappearance of the manager should not be understood as a break in the system. It is one of the system's regular operations. Vacancy does not suspend order. It activates succession. The extinguished lamp, the formula of recognition, the compulsory search, and the appeal to the charter all show that the town has already internalised the procedures by which authority renews itself. In this opening movement, Ligotti presents a severe image of civilization in miniature: not a rational order that occasionally fails, but a durable structure that persists through opacity, repetition, and inherited compliance.

b. Arbitrary Power and the Destruction of Infrastructure

If IV.a. shows that the town preserves authority through ritual even in the manager's



absence, the next episode shows what happens when that authority speaks again. The new manager does not appear in public. He does not explain himself. Instead, a torn scrap of paper comes skittering down Main Street with the misspelt command “DUSTROY TROLY” (Ligotti, 2008). In that moment, power returns not as presence but as order.

The note is important because of its condition. It is made of cheap, pulpy paper, brownish in colour, and written in a hand that looks as though it had been traced with charred wood. The message is clumsy, but its force is not reduced by that clumsiness. Ligotti’s point is severe: command does not need refinement in order to govern. It needs only recognition. The town reads the note as coming from the new manager, and that is enough to make it binding.

The townspeople do hesitate, but their hesitation has a narrow scope. They are not rejecting the manager’s authority. They are waiting for a reason. The narrator explains that earlier managers sometimes removed the structures or symbols of a predecessor, yet they usually offered some explanation for doing so. Here no explanation arrives. Ritter proposes sending a note to request further instructions, but no one volunteers to approach the shed. The town therefore pauses, not because it has discovered resistance, but because it still expects power to cloak itself in some minimum of sense.

The trolley itself matters far more than a casual reader might suppose. The old manager had introduced it as an “official project,” and the narrator calls it a “monument to his spirit of innovation” (Ligotti, 2008). Even if the town never truly needed such transport, the trolley had become part of local routine. People rode it. Some depended on it. Carnes earned his living by driving it. The trolley is therefore not just an object in the street. It is a small system within the town, one that links administration, movement, and work.

That is why the order to destroy it carries such weight. In the story’s miniature model of civilization, infrastructure stands for the material supports through which collective life is organised. The trolley is modest in scale, but it still belongs to that logic. It gives visible form to an earlier administrative plan. It also ties livelihood to civic arrangement. When the new manager orders its destruction without explanation, the story shows that authority can cancel a functioning structure by fiat. The act is arbitrary in one sense, yet perfectly legible in another. A new regime marks its arrival by erasing the visible work of the old one.

The next morning gives the command its full meaning. The trolley runs down Main Street

without stopping. It reaches the far end of town. When the townspeople investigate, they find the naked and mutilated body of Carnes inside, with the words “DUSTROY TROLY” burned into his chest (Ligotti, 2008). Administrative language is no longer merely written on paper. It has been written on flesh. What had seemed obscure now reveals its method. The command is backed by exemplary violence.

Carnes is not an incidental victim. He is the trolley driver. His body links the order against the infrastructure to the worker attached to it. Ligotti therefore binds technical destruction to human destruction. The system does not simply remove a conveyance from the town. It destroys the person most closely identified with that conveyance and makes his corpse carry the order that authorises the act. The note and the body belong to the same logic. Both reduce governance to imperative inscription.

After this discovery, the townspeople obey. They destroy the trolley. They also pull up the tracks and tear down the electrical system that powered it. The target is therefore larger than a single vehicle. What disappears is a whole network of movement and support. Ligotti makes this extension explicit, and it matters for the article’s argument. Authority is shown here not merely punishing disobedience, but actively dismantling the material basis of a shared civic arrangement.

The next message follows at once: “GUD ... NXT YUR JBS WULL CHNG” (Ligotti, 2008). This sequence is crucial. First a structure is removed. Then labour is reassigned. The story moves, in other words, from destruction to reorganisation. The manager does not govern by maintaining continuity. He governs by breaking one arrangement and imposing another. The trolley episode thus marks a turning point in the narrative. The town is no longer merely living under obscure authority. It is being actively reformatted by it.

This is why the scene matters so much within the article’s larger claim. It shows that systemic power in *The Town Manager* operates through command, fear, and forced adaptation, but it does not need to announce itself in elevated political form. A scrap of paper is enough. A mutilated body is enough. A population already trained to comply is enough. What looks at first like grotesque absurdity proves, on closer inspection, to be a concentrated image of destructive administration. The next subsection follows that process into a wider social transformation, where the town is no longer altered at one point only, but remade across its jobs, buildings, and public life.



c. Funny Town: Spectacle and Extractive Labour

If the destruction of the trolley shows that the new manager can dismantle an existing civic arrangement at will, the transformation of the town into “Funny Town” shows what follows after that act of destruction. The point is no longer the removal of one structure. It is the refashioning of the whole town. This new phase begins, as before, with a note carried by the wind: “GUD ... NXT YUR JBS WULL CHNG” (Ligotti, 2008). The message is crude, but its effects are extensive. Jobs change, buildings change, and, as the narrator says, “the entire face of the town” changes with them. Workmen again arrive from outside, and the townspeople are instructed not to interfere. By the time the process is complete, the town resembles “a carnival funhouse,” while its inhabitants function as “sideshow freaks” within the new environment (Ligotti, 2008).

This episode matters because it shows that coercion in the story is not an end in itself. It clears the ground for reorganisation. The manager does not simply command obedience within an inherited setting. He remakes the setting so that obedience is built into everyday life. At this point, the town ceases to be merely a decayed civic space. It becomes a designed environment in which work, movement, and visibility are reorganised for outside consumption. The social world is no longer managed only through orders. It is managed through form.

The remaking is first visible in the town’s buildings. Ritter’s hardware store no longer sells useful goods. It becomes “Comfort Castle,” a maze of decorative but non-functional lavatories, fronted by a mock-medieval façade and watched over by Ritter in the uniform of an attendant. Leeman’s barber shop becomes “Baby Town,” where the former barber is forced to languish in oversized infant clothing inside a giant playpen. Other storefronts simulate abandonment, but their interiors conceal miniature theatres, dubious galleries, or spaces that trap the visitor until an exit is found at the rear. Behind Main Street stretches an enclosed zone of alleys in permanent artificial night, shaped by dim lamps, fences, walls, and effects designed to produce unease (Ligotti, 2008). The town is therefore not merely decorated. It is scripted.

That spatial reorganisation is central to the article’s argument. Earlier sections established that the town functions as a reduced model of civilization. Here that model becomes more exact, because built space itself begins to express power. The manager no longer relies only on notes, threats, or exemplary violence. He turns the town into a material system that channels behaviour and fixes roles. Shops cease

to serve ordinary use. Streets cease to support ordinary passage. Interiors become attractions. The environment is no longer the setting of social life in the usual sense. It becomes the instrument through which a new order is imposed and displayed.

Labour changes just as sharply. Under the new management, work is detached from ordinary use and redirected toward staged experience. Ritter no longer trades in hardware. Leeman no longer cuts hair. The narrator no longer pursues anything like a conventional occupation. He is assigned to a kiosk at the end of a strange alley, where he sells a liquid that is “something more like bouillon” than soup to visitors who have come precisely in search of such contrived oddities (Ligotti, 2008). He sleeps behind the counter, consumes the same thin broth he sells, and begins by assuming that the manager’s scheme is simply another way of draining the town. That judgement is understandable, but incomplete. The system does more than impoverish. It turns impoverishment itself into saleable form.

This is the point at which the phrase spectacle economy becomes analytically useful. The brochure found by the narrator makes the logic explicit. Its cover reads “HAVE A FUN TIME IN FUNNY TOWN,” and inside it presents captioned images of the town’s “attractions” for the “curious tourist” (Ligotti, 2008). The town is no longer framed as a place where people live under imposed conditions. It is advertised as a destination. The perspective that now governs it is external. Residents inhabit the town as workers and exhibits, while outsiders encounter the same space as curated entertainment. The town’s misery is not concealed by the spectacle. It is packaged as part of the attraction.

For that reason, the “Funny Town” sequence should not be reduced to satire of tourism alone. Tourism is present, but the deeper issue is systemic. The story models a social order in which human life acquires economic value only after it has been reformatted for display. Buildings become attractions. Occupations become performances. Even bodily degradation becomes part of the town’s marketable identity. What outsiders consume as novelty, the residents endure as imposed function. The town therefore offers a compact image of a wider civilizational logic in which communities are made profitable by being rendered strange, accessible, and controllable.

The economic structure of this order confirms the point. Once tourists begin to arrive, money flows into the town in quantities the narrator had not expected. He speaks of an “unprecedented flood of revenue” (Ligotti, 2008), and for a brief period the threat of complete destitution seems to



recede. Yet this apparent improvement is deeply unequal. The townspeople are allowed only enough to survive. The manager is the true beneficiary. Collections are made daily, sometimes hourly, by armed strangers, and spies are placed among the tourists to ensure that residents do not withhold more than a meagre share of the profits they generate. The town has entered a new economy, but not one that grants its inhabitants control over their labour or over its returns.

This asymmetry is crucial. The transformation of the town may look, at first glance, like a grotesque form of revitalisation. Buildings are active again. Visitors arrive. Money circulates. Yet none of this amounts to restoration. The town has not recovered civic life. It has been inserted into an extractive system in which appearance, labour, and place are organised for someone else's gain. The old pattern of obedience remains, but it now operates within a more profitable arrangement. Authority has moved from mere succession and command to managed monetisation.

Seen in this light, "Funny Town" is one of the story's most important developments. It shows that the manager's power extends beyond punishment and beyond arbitrary decree. He can redesign space, assign function, and convert collective degradation into income. The town remains a miniature model of civilization, but the model has changed in emphasis. Earlier, the stress fell on ritual obedience and opaque succession. Here the stress falls on commodified social existence. Ligotti's point is not simply that authority can deform a community. It is that such deformation can be made productive. The next subsection follows that logic toward its eventual limit, where the viability of the spectacle begins to fail and the question of departure comes into view.

d. Beyond the Town: Systemic Universality and Recruitment

The final movement of *The Town Manager* changes the scale of the story. Up to this point, the town has functioned as a bounded setting in which the mechanisms of authority are unusually visible. Its opacity, its rituals, its violence, and its later spectacle economy might still be read as local distortions, however grotesque they are. The narrator's departure removes that possibility. What first appears to be an exit from the town's order becomes the point at which the story reveals that the town was never exceptional. It was exemplary.

This reversal matters because it changes the status of the miniature. A miniature may be exceptional, in which case it remains a sealed curiosity, or it may be representative, in which case it

condenses a wider pattern into graspable form. Ligotti chooses the second path. The narrator leaves in the hope that some other place might have been "founded upon different principles and operated under a different order," yet what he finds is that other towns and cities are "managed according to the same principles" as his own, although none has reached quite the same advanced stage of degeneracy (Ligotti, 2008). The town therefore ceases to be a singular grotesque and becomes a model.

The collapse of "Funny Town" prepares this discovery with some care. Once the tourists thin out, revenue disappears, the armed collectors stop making their rounds, and the apparent vitality of the new order falls away almost at once. The residents emerge from their assigned spaces and gather beneath the sagging banner that still proclaims "WELCOME TO FUNNY TOWN." They return to the countryside, inspect the shed and the farmhouse, and find no manager, no money, and no sustaining centre of authority. The system has not been repaired. It has merely exhausted one of its temporary forms.

At this point the narrator makes the only real break in the story. When the others turn back toward town, he remains behind and then walks away in the opposite direction. The decision matters because it briefly reactivates a familiar narrative possibility. Departure usually opens a path toward discovery, transformation, or release. Here it does none of those things. The world beyond the town does not offer contrast. It offers repetition. The narrator moves through many towns and large cities, supports himself with odd jobs and cleaning work, and learns that the same managerial logic governs elsewhere. Spatial movement therefore produces conceptual clarification rather than freedom.

This is the point at which the article's central metaphor reaches a broader scale. Earlier sections argued that the town functions as a microcosmic model of civilization. The narrator's journey confirms that claim by demonstrating that the model is transferable. What had seemed a reduced civic pathology now appears as a local expression of a larger order. The lamp, the office, the charter, the directives, the spectacle economy, and the constant managerial turnover were never merely odd features of one decayed settlement. They were concentrated signs of a wider system. The town is miniature not because it is trivial, but because it is compressive.

The emotional force of this discovery should also be stated carefully. The narrator does not merely become disappointed. He reaches the conclusion that there is no outside available to him, or at least none he can find. Ligotti makes that limit explicit when the narrator begins to think that the



only remaining course is to “make an end of it” (Ligotti, 2008). The sentence is important because it marks the collapse of one final narrative reserve: if departure cannot lead to another order, then the choice seems to narrow to endurance or self-erasure. The story does not sentimentalise this point. It presents it as the logical consequence of systemic universality

The recruiter scene then gives this universality a final and more exact form. Sitting in a crummy coffee shop beneath a highway overpass, the narrator is approached by a well-dressed man who studies him, joins him, and begins a probing conversation about his line of work and his experience of the world beyond the town. The conversation is not cast in openly supernatural terms. That is one reason it is so effective. The man speaks as if conducting an ordinary professional inquiry, yet the context and timing make the real implication unmistakable: the narrator is being assessed for managerial suitability. The system does not merely extend everywhere. It also selects.

This final encounter completes the article’s anti-restorative reading of the story. In more conventional narrative structures, the last encounter often brings recognition, reward, accession, or return. Ligotti preserves the position but changes its consequence. What the narrator receives is not knowledge that redeems, not status that dignifies, and not closure that settles the preceding events. He is offered a place within the same structure that has shaped and damaged him. Resolution becomes recruitment.

That reversal gives the ending its full force. The story no longer concerns only the disappearance

V. FROM FOLKTALE MORPHOLOGY TO SYSTEMIC REPRODUCTION

The preceding analysis has shown that *The Town Manager* constructs the town as a microcosmic model of civilization and unfolds that model through a recognisable narrative sequence. The task of this section is not to rehearse the close reading in compressed form. It is to state more clearly what kind of structure that sequence produces. The central claim is that Ligotti preserves several Propp-like action-positions while depriving them of their usual restorative force. The result is not a folktale pattern in any strict sense, but an anti-folktale cycle whose real end-point is systemic reproduction rather than resolution.

This claim requires methodological restraint. Propp is useful here as a comparative framework, not as a rigid checklist. The point is not to prove that Ligotti reproduces folktale morphology

of one town manager or the misery of one declining town. It concerns the reproducibility of management itself. Managers vanish. Others arrive. Towns adapt. Structures are removed, replaced, monetised, and abandoned. Populations comply because they have been formed within such arrangements. Then, when needed, the system draws new administrators from among those who have already learned how to survive inside it. Continuity therefore depends less on legitimacy than on selection, replacement, habituation, and scale.

This is also where the phrase nihilistic miniature becomes most exact. The town is miniature because it reduces a broad civilizational order to a bounded and narratively manageable space. It is nihilistic because that order persists without moral depth, without shared purpose, and without any promise of redemptive development. What matters is not justice, consent, or meaning. What matters is reproducibility. The world beyond the town confirms what the town had already shown in reduced form: civilization survives by renewing its offices and by finding new functionaries to occupy them.

For that reason, IV.d. should be read as the point where metaphor and morphology finally converge. Metaphorically, the town expands from local model to general pattern. Morphologically, departure and final encounter retain recognisable narrative positions while losing any restorative effect. Together they yield the story’s most severe insight: there is no true exterior to the system, only further instances of it and the means by which it continues. What began as a story of disappearance ends as a story of replacement.

in full. It is to show that the story repeatedly occupies recognisable structural positions and then alters their consequences. What matters, therefore, is not exhaustive correspondence but functional resemblance. The narrative clearly moves through disturbance, response, renewed authority, transformation, outward movement, and final encounter. What changes is the direction in which those positions lead.

The first of these positions is a disturbed initial order. The town begins in a state of diminished continuity, not in a state of health. Its institutions are weakened, its civic space has contracted, and its inhabitants live within inherited routines they do not fully understand. Even so, the system remains intelligible enough for disruption to register when the manager disappears and the light in the office goes out. In broad morphological terms, the story therefore begins with an initial condition and then introduces



lack or absence at its centre. Yet Ligotti immediately modifies the inherited pattern, because the initial order is already exhausted before it is disturbed. The story begins not from equilibrium, but from survivable decay.

The next position is collective response. In a folktale, absence or lack usually generates purposeful action aimed at recovery, remedy, or return. Ligotti keeps the place of that action, but empties it of hope. The townspeople conduct the search because the charter requires it, not because they expect to find the missing manager. The quest survives as form while purpose has thinned out almost completely. What remains is motion without genuine horizon. This is one of the story's first major reversals, and it matters because it makes ritual more important than agency. The narrative does not move toward restoration. It moves through compliance.

The arrival of renewed authority produces the next structural shift. In a more conventional sequence, a new figure entering after disturbance might aid repair, establish legitimacy, or stabilise the social field. In Ligotti's story, the manager occupies the same formal position but performs the opposite function. He does not heal the damaged order. He intensifies it. Authority returns as directive, and the first directive is destructive. The command to eliminate the trolley, followed by the mutilation of Carnes and the dismantling of the system attached to him, makes it clear that managerial power operates through intervention rather than restoration. The authority-position remains central, but its consequence has changed from settlement to coercive reorganisation.

Transformation follows, but again in altered form. In folktale structures, transformation may elevate, reveal, or prepare eventual reward. In *The Town Manager*, it degrades, repurposes, and monetises. The remaking of the town into "Funny Town" is therefore not a decorative episode. It is the point at which the story shows most clearly that systems can survive by changing their surface and by assigning new functions to old spaces. Buildings become attractions. Work becomes display. The town does not move closer to resolution. It becomes more deeply organised by extraction. Morphologically, the sequence advances; materially, it curdles.

Departure, too, retains its position while losing its expected value. In a wide range of narratives, leaving the initial setting opens access to another order of experience. The protagonist may encounter danger there, but departure still enlarges possibility. Ligotti permits this movement only long enough to undo it. When the narrator leaves town, he discovers not an outside, but repetition on a larger

scale. Other places are governed by the same principles, even if they have not reached the same advanced stage of decay. The story therefore converts departure into recognition of universality. Spatial movement no longer means escape. It means confirmation.

The final encounter completes the pattern. In classical narrative terms, the end of a sequence often brings reward, recognition, accession, or reintegration. Ligotti keeps the formal place of such an ending, but alters its substance. The recruiter approaches the narrator not to restore him, but to identify him as a possible manager. Closure becomes selection. The protagonist is not brought back into a meaningful order. He is positioned for absorption into the mechanism that has governed the story from the start. At this point, the anti-restorative character of the whole sequence becomes unmistakable. The ending does not close the cycle. It prepares its renewal.

Seen in this way, the structure of the story may be stated with some precision. It does not move from disruption to solution. It moves from vacancy to response, from response to intervention, from intervention to reformatting, from reformatting to apparent exit, and from apparent exit to recruitment. That sequence is why the phrase systemic reproduction is more accurate than terms such as *closure*, *resolution*, or even *return*. What persists through every change is not a moral order, a civic ideal, or a recoverable norm. What persists is the system's capacity to continue through replacement.

This is also the point at which the article's two frameworks come into their clearest relation. Conceptual Metaphor Theory explains how the town functions as a bounded model of civilization. Proppian morphology explains how that model is set in motion through a series of recognisable but altered action-positions. Neither framework is sufficient on its own. Metaphor clarifies the story's conceptual organisation. Morphology clarifies the story's sequential logic. Taken together, they show why the town is not merely a grotesque setting and why the plot is not merely a sequence of bizarre incidents. The story becomes legible as a formally disciplined account of how systems endure.

The importance of this synthesis lies in what it reveals about nihilism in the story. Ligotti's nihilism does not reside only in atmosphere, pessimistic suggestion, or anti-humanist implication. It is embedded in structure. Every position that might have led to remedy in another narrative is re-engineered here into evidence of continuity. The search proves obedience. Transformation proves adaptability. Departure proves universality. Final



encounter proves reproducibility. The world of *The Town Manager* is therefore horrifying not simply because it is cruel or absurd, but because it can go on without requiring justification.

For that reason, the most accurate description of the story's structure is neither *dark folktale* nor *bureaucratic nightmare* taken on its own. It is an anti-restorative narrative of systemic reproduction. Ligotti borrows a grammar of disturbance and response, then uses it to show that disruption is one of the means by which order perpetuates itself. What disappears is restoration. What remains is recurrence. The conclusion can therefore turn, without repetition, to the larger significance of this formal design and to the phrase that has guided the article throughout: nihilistic miniature.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Thomas Ligotti's *The Town Manager* is best read as a microcosmic narrative model of civilization. The town is not merely a grotesque setting, and it is not simply a symbolic backdrop for philosophical pessimism. It is a reduced social world in which authority, labour, space, and succession become unusually legible. Because the narrative works on a compressed scale, it can show with particular sharpness how a system continues even when its legitimacy is obscure and its forms are visibly decayed.

The argument has proceeded through two connected claims. First, Conceptual Metaphor Theory helps explain how the town functions as a concrete source domain through which civilization is imagined and organised. The manager corresponds to governing authority, the lamp to visible continuity, the charter to inherited legitimacy in damaged form, and the town's infrastructure to the material supports of collective life. Second, Proppian morphology helps explain why this model acquires such force in sequence. The story retains recognisable narrative positions, but it empties them of restorative consequence. Search becomes ritual. Transformation becomes degradation. Departure becomes confirmation that there is no outside. Final encounter becomes recruitment.

The "Funny Town" sequence is especially important because it reveals what civilization looks like once exploitation becomes extreme. The inhabitants are not only governed. They are reassigned, displayed, and reduced to humiliating roles. Ritter becomes an attendant outside "Comfort Castle." Leeman is forced to languish in infant clothing inside "Baby Town." The narrator is

stationed in a kiosk at the end of a contrived alley, selling a thin liquid to visitors who consume the town as staged strangeness. What is sold to outsiders as entertainment is lived by the residents as degradation. In this phase of the story, civilization appears not as refinement or order, but as a system that can reorganise human life into profitable abasement.

At the same time, Ligotti insists that such a system is not stable in any meaningful sense. "Funny Town" lasts only while it remains lucrative. Once the tourists thin out, revenue dries up, the armed collectors disappear, and the arrangement collapses with striking speed. The townspeople gather again beneath the sagging banner, return to the countryside, and find no manager, no money, and no sustaining centre behind the spectacle. Yet this failure does not produce release. The narrator knows that another manager will arrive before long. What disappears is only one temporary form of administration. The system itself remains ready to continue under another shape. That is why the story should not be read as a simple account of decline. It is an account of replacement.

This point gives the article's title phrase, nihilistic miniature, its fullest meaning. The town is miniature because it reduces a broad civilizational logic to a bounded and narratively graspable space. It is nihilistic because that logic survives without moral grounding, without transparent purpose, and without any promise of redemptive development. The deepest horror of the story lies not in one bizarre command or in one grotesque transformation. It lies in reproducibility. Managers vanish. New ones arrive. Forms decay, then mutate. Populations adapt. The damaged are finally drawn into the work of continuation itself.

For that reason, the conclusion of the article can now be stated with some precision. *The Town Manager* is not only a tale of arbitrary rule, and not only a philosophical horror text. It is a formally disciplined narrative about how civilization persists through opacity, coercion, extraction, and succession. Its plot does not move from disruption to remedy. It moves from vacancy to renewal of control. In this respect, Ligotti's story comes close to Kafka in its treatment of impersonal procedure and inaccessible authority, though it remains distinctly Ligottian in its grotesque materiality and in its emphasis on degenerative succession. The town is small, but the logic it reveals is not.

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