Identity Unbound: Gothic Themes and Posthuman Perspectives in Catherine Lacey's *Pew*

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Abstract: In Catherine Lacey's *Pew* (2020), a congregation in an unnamed town in the American South, discovers a mysterious figure—Pew—sleeping on a pew. Pew's gender, age, and racial identity are indistinguishable, and as the townspeople grapple with Pew's identity, they disclose their worries and confidences in monological conversations with Pew, as the latter remains silent. This paper aims to examine the intersection of Gothic and Posthuman themes that portray Pew as an outsider whose silence disrupts the community's social cohesion. Pew's silence reveals how the absence of language can provoke both intrigue and fear as it destabilizes the community bonds and boundaries that language typically reinforces. Pew can be understood as a posthuman figure whose fluid and undefinable selfhood challenges normative concepts of identity definition and reveals contemporary fears of otherness linked to concepts such as queer identities, trust, innocence, and transparency.

INTRODUCTION: GOTHIC, THE POSTHUMAN, AND IDENTITY

Gothic literature explores a variety of themes that are relevant not only to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when Gothic novels were popular but also to contemporary culture. These themes include the persistent influence of the historical past on the present, the complex and divided nature of the self, the portrayal of individuals or groups

as monstrous or outsiders, and a focus on bodies that are altered, gro-
tesque, or afflicted. The reason Gothic literature remains influential is
its profound relevance in addressing contemporary worries (Spooner 8),
such as perceived threats from another considered as alien, terrorism,
and "technological annihilation"(Bolton 2), together with "anxieties
surrounding gender, sexuality, power and consumption" (Peaty 55).

Thus, the enduring appeal of Gothic literature stems from its
capacity to engage with new fears and anxieties such as the perception
of the other as a threat to social and technological concerns. These
themes interconnect with broader philosophical systems of thought
aimed to address the changing nature of human identity in the con-
temporary world. In this scenario, Posthumanism arises as an important
paradigm for expanding these Gothic horrors that can include elements
like violence, trauma, dehumanization, and the gloomy roots on which
the traditional understanding of human identity is based, that is, the
exclusionary definition of what is human through the delimitation of
what is perceived as other or non-human. Posthumanism intends to
challenge and correct the exclusion of those who do not conform to
the humanist ideal of white, western, and male, seen in both humanist
ideology and certain models of posthuman ultra-humanism. Posthu-
manism aims to redefine the principles and understanding of what it
means to be human, serving as a philosophical, cultural, and critical
framework. There is no established scholarly definition of terms such
as posthumanism, the posthuman, or posthumanist. According to Fran-
cesca Ferrando, "posthuman" is an umbrella term that includes "philo-
sophical, cultural, and critical posthumanism" (Ferrando 26). Critical
posthumanism, or posthumanism as a philosophical approach, is a reac-
tion against the central position of the human in humanist thought,
and it urges a reconsideration of the belief in human exceptionalism
and to consider the human's place in a global, interconnected world
that includes both nature and technology. In other words, Critical post-
humanism is both about the evolution of humanity in conjunction with
technology and science and the intended end of humanism with its
narcissistic belief in human superiority, and it is also about how humans
should live in this new state of things. It is about the inclusion of all the
previously excluded and weak from social discourse and the displace-
ment of patriarchy. It is how to treat the environment and other human
and non-human beings; it is the future of humanity and how human

actions—right and wrong—affect the future. In Rosi Braidotti's words, "the posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming" (12).

This philosophical stance is reflected in the field of literary creation, where "the rise of posthuman bodies . . . that reconceptualize the 'nature' of the human, and their ethic-political implications in terms of the human-non-human relation, are addressed" (Nayar 33). To recognize the current role of posthumanism in literature, it is useful to explore its relationship with the Gothic genre, which has historically evolved alongside societal fears and fascinations. Gothic, as a literary genre, has gone through several peaks of popularity from the publication of the first officially recognized Gothic novel—Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story,* published anonymously in 1764—to the present day.

Gothic, like Critical Posthumanism, shares an analytical perspective against the Enlightenment and its master narratives stating the centrality of human positionality and an understanding of human identity formed in an exclusionary way (Muñoz-González 210). In her seminal work *The Posthuman* (2013), Braidotti explains that the traditional humanist ideal of human perfection marginalizes individuals who deviate from the predominantly white, western, attractive, able-bodied, and heterosexual norm, relegating them to a diminished status akin to disposable bodies (15). Posthumanism and other non-human-centric modes of thinking, such as poststructuralism, deconstruction, critical theory, postmodernism, feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory and postcolonial theory—including the works of scholars such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Theodor Adorno, Jean François Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Sigmund Freud, Edward Said, and Gayatry Spivak—expand on the criticism of the human-centered view from the Enlightenment and contribute to the development of anti-humanist thought. Moreover, in Posthumanism, ethics are located within the space of political movements defending those voices that have been silenced by liberal humanism, such as feminism, queer theory, and animal rights movements, that is, those previously non-included in the normative model and thus considered non-human.

The Gothic reemerges in coincidence with and opposition to particular historical circumstances and mainstream ideas. The first wave is usually linked to a reaction to the unique and extreme cult of reason

in the Enlightenment. In the second-Late Victorian wave, Gothic novels "exploited emergent and marginal sciences whose findings potentially naturalize the supernatural" (Luckhurst xviii) and showed the fear of the other, whether socially or biologically different: the working class, the feral mob, the monster. This is a characteristic that has survived into the third wave, to the present day, from the fear of the zombie to the fear of becoming the zombie, as the genre "speaks to universal, primitive taboos about the very foundational elements of what it means to be human" (xiii). Gothic is a hybrid, illegitimate, and transgressive genre representing the dark forces that threaten the order and peace of everyday life. It arises and reappears cyclically, and in an era of mass consumerism, technological omnipresence, and biological modification in a threatened environment, it seems to maintain its attraction.

Furthermore, in Gothic literature, terror is a narrative device that can appear within supernatural settings or elements at play to reflect on a specific period or society's political, societal, and religious conflicts and concerns. Pramod Nayar suggests that from a Posthuman perspective in which embracing diversity and merging with the different is crucial for human survival, the source of fear comes from our failure to accept and coexist with the other, which might ultimately turn out to be precisely a reflection of ourselves (118).

In this context, the irrational and unconventional nature of Gothic narratives has rendered queer theory a particularly compelling framework for examining their modern expressions. As Andrew J. Owens explains, queer perspectives reject the dualities imposed by societal norms, both in culture and within horror and fantasy narratives. Queer is a term particularly suitable for the Gothic genre, which very often emphasizes topics related to sex and death (35): "Gothic has always been queer: . . . stylistically, structurally and, of course, sexually. Indeed, the queerness of the genre has always been part of its enduring appeal" (Owens 34). This entanglement of terror with fear of the other in Gothic literature not only highlights societal anxieties but also provides a space for exploring the fluidity and complexity of identity as seen through the lens of queer theory.

In opposition to Enlightenment anthropocentric models, Donna Haraway affirms that "we have never been humans," thus, the logical question that follows should be, then, "Who are we, when are we, where are we, and what is to be done?" (Gane 157). Paralleling Haraway's

line of thought, Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen wonder, as the title of their article states, "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?" In conjunction with the Enlightenment normative, cognitive, and rational sense of the human, Luciano and Chen distinguish two more inflections of the term Posthuman: the affective one, linked to the ability to feel for others, and the understanding of the human as a species, which aligns humans with other forms of life and encourages a material connection, although still maintains hierarchical differences (195). The figure of the queer body has repeatedly unsettled the human norm to the point that these bodies have been excluded from the very notion of full humanness (Luciano and Chen 188). Both authors are reluctant to detach queer thought from narratives of vulnerability and develop the concept of "queerness" as a philosophical construct. They still claim the need to question the very concept of the human and highlight the existence of indigenous ontologies that recognize agency and sentience in inanimate entities, and this is why Luciano and Chen favor the term "nonhuman" in the context of queerness, not as an endorsement of nonhuman concepts, but due to its "familiarity, as a common descriptor of the focus of new critical developments" (196).

However, in the twenty-first century, new technologies have given birth to new anxieties. Gothic stories and tropes are recycled and reappropriated to reflect on contemporary techno-social relations, the consumer culture of late capitalism, contemporary subjectivity, and human behavior (Edwards, "Contemporary American Gothic" 76–78). Posthuman Gothic texts bring to the fore "the discourses of difference we use to establish categories like 'human' and 'non-human,' thus presenting a particularly useful textual basis for a posthumanist reading" (Heise 221). Responding to these evolving anxieties, contemporary Gothic literature continues to develop, producing new subgenres that reflect the contemporary complex, modern world. According to Wester and Aldana Reyes, there is no such thing as "21st-century Gothic," but twenty-first-century different branches with different topics and sensibilities labeled as "Gothic." Some of them directly derive from the tradition, updating it: Postcolonial Gothic, Queer Gothic, Postfeminist Gothic or Neoliberal Gothic, and some contemporary subgenres such as Steampunk, Gothic Comedy, Posthuman Gothic, Eco-Gothic and The New Weird.

In this dynamic scenario, Gothic texts' primary goal has been to shock, disrupt, or provoke repulsion in the readers, what Xavier Aldana

Reyes styles as the affective power of Gothic fiction or the genre's potential to evoke a response, not only psychological but physical. Thus, Gothic affect "relies on notions of external threat, whether these are ominous and shapeless, or embodied" (Aldana Reyes 17). Criticism of the twenty-first-century Gothic follows two main approaches: the one that "relies on theoretical frameworks such as Derrida's haunting, Freud's uncanny and the return of the repressed or Trauma studies and the one that focuses on aesthetic and thematic aspects to discuss the text's potential for social criticism in terms of gender, sexuality, race, subcultural identities, and power structures" (14).

In a similar vein, Catherine Lacey's third novel, *Pew* (2020), has been labeled as a "Southern Gothic Fable" (Rooney). The novel is set in an unnamed town in the American South, where a church congregation discovers a mysterious figure sleeping on a pew. This person has indistinguishable gender, age, and racial identity, and they remain silent. The family that formerly occupied this specific pew decides to take care of the mysterious person and gives them the name of the place where they were found: Pew. The town inhabitants are preparing for an annual event called the Forgiveness Festival and Pew is moved from one household to another. The apparently goodhearted townspeople grapple with contradictory perceptions of Pew's identity, and they disclose their worries and confidences in conversations that are essentially monologues as Pew always remains silent. Pew listens and observes, although the people's secrets occasionally trigger brief glimpses of Pew's past or not very specific hints about their origins. As the date of the Festival approaches, Pew's presence becomes more and more disturbing for the town community. People's attitudes turn from generosity to perceiving Pew as a menace. The final climax of the story is the Forgiveness Festival when readers understand the true character of the ritual. The discovery of Pew's true nature, female or male, black or white, child or young adult, or even if they are human or not, loses all significance when confronted with the town's truth.

THE NARRATOR: PEW. BODY, GENDER, QUEERNESS, AND RACE

Pew starts with an epigraph from Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973). The excerpt explains how those "who walk away from Omelas" go alone, "ahead into the darkness. . . . But they seem to know where they are going" (Lacey). Le

Guin's story shows a city where people live constantly in serenity and splendor. However, their well-being is based on the permanent suffering of a single child. Those "who walk away" are some members of this society, unable to stand the accumulated guilt of knowing that a child is living in constant misery to allow the rest of the people to live happily. Le Guin's story problematizes the idea and the justification of good for many based on evil for a few, affirming the ethical imperative to provide justice and equity for all.

Additionally, in the epilogue of the novel, titled "Be advised," Lacey deliberately inscribes her work within the tradition of the Southern Gothic novel. This conscious connection is reflected in the inclusion of various names. Lacey draws inspiration from influential figures such as Flannery O'Connor, known for her sardonic Southern Gothic style; Zora Neale Hurston, and her exploration of the American South and racial struggles; Carson McCullers, with her focus on Southern Gothic and roots; Eudora Welty and her focus on characteristic Southern topics as the importance of place, and mythological influences. Furthermore, David Buckel is recognized for his self-immolation, leaving a poignant message about the impact of fossil fuels on human health.[1] The philosophical insights of Derek Parfit on personal identity, challenging conventional perspectives, are also acknowledged.[2] Collectively, the acknowledgments section predicts a story that in detail intermingles Southern Gothic elements, racial issues and belonging, environmental consciousness, and philosophical depth.

The central figure in the novel, Pew, not only takes on the role of the primary character but also serves as the first-person narrator and internal focalizer. Pew is like all Lacey's narrators to date: "spiritually homeless and sometimes physically too" (Power). In her first novel, *Nobody Is Ever Missing* (2014), Elyria, the main character and narrator, suddenly abandons her husband and leaves her life in Manhattan to fly to New Zealand. During her very often dangerous and surreal meetings with New Zealand's people and environment, the reader discovers that she is haunted by her sister's death and the deep contrast between her inner feelings of rage and violence and an external peaceful appearance. This difference between what the others perceive and what she knows about herself leads to her main obsession: if the others cannot see her true inner self, does she exist? Is she even alive? In her second novel, *The Answers* (2017), Mary seeks answers to her persistent and

distressing health problems, feeling that her own body, which she considers her sole possession, has somehow been taken away. In the novel, Lacey revisits the underlying question in her first work: Do humans possess a tangible inner essence, represented by a "real face" concealed from others? In *The Answers*, recognizing this true identity, inner feelings, and responses becomes even more imprecise because scientific experiments on behavioral reactions and neurochemical interventions further complicate the problem of defining the individual's limits. In her most recent novel, *Biography of X* (2023), the narrator, C.M. Lucca, traces the biography of her deceased wife, X, a mysterious performance artist. The story unfolds against a backdrop of counterfactual history, where, after 1945, a divided America includes a theocracy in the Southern States. The novel presents an alternative dystopian version of the United State's last decades. However, the narrator's primary quest to uncover her deceased wife's factual life reveals her struggles to find her own identity while revisiting a past marked by instances of toxic love and mistreatment.

Once again, in *Pew*, another of Lacey's narrators wonders: who am I? Sociologist Derek Layder explains that the self or personal identity is "a centre of awareness, emotional needs and desires, in terms of which an individual reflects and acts upon his or her social circumstances" (7). Thus, personal identity is defined by our inner perspective, that is, how we regard ourselves. However, there is also a social identity that is born from a combination of the "tension between fitting in with society and other people . . . and wanting to follow our own desires, hopes and wishes" (Layder 2). As Layder remarks, the self is a combination of social and psychological elements. Consequently, the self is dual, with a personal identity based on the difference in relation to others, and a social identity based on the similarity in relation to the same others (Deschamps and Devos 7). In this sociological definition of identity, there is always a component of the self that remains separate from the social sphere, even though the existence of the self relies on its connection to a social context (Layder 7).

As Lisa Blackman states, the sociological definition of identity formation neglects the body's integral role. The emphasis is on society and culture as a sense-making activity that leaves the body relegated to what she calls "an absent presence" (6). However, the body has a key role in understanding how social differences, such as race, class,

sexuality, and gender become ingrained in our identities and contribute to "othering processes," where affective connections between individuals are denied, perpetuating a notion of the body as belonging to a "separate and self-contained subject" and the categorization of certain bodies as inferior or abnormal (Blackman 59–60).

Pew's body resists any attempt of categorization—young, but of indefinite age, ethnically ambiguous, and androgynous. Pew does not feel their own body belongs to them or is able to recognize their image in a mirror (Lacey 5). Pew does not categorize their body and does not accept other's contradictory perceptions of it: "Anything I remember being told about my body contradicts something else I've been told. I look at my skin and I cannot say what shade it is" (Lacey 8). This undefinable body "unsettles the human as the norm and generates other possibilities—multiple, cyborgian, spectral, transcorporeal, transmaterial" (Luciano and Chen 188). It is precisely this body and Pew's silence that are the source of discomfort and distrust for the people in this Southern American Christian community.

This rigid sociological framework categorizes individuals as belonging to a community only if they conform to the prescribed "sameness," thereby excluding those who deviate from an identity formulated on binarisms. In contrast, a Posthumanist non-dualistic approach rejects any traditional understanding of the world relying on binary oppositions. Regarding the body, the Posthumanist rejection of dualisms is evident in oppositions like female/male, black/white, disabled/normal, etc. Instead of understanding these categories as inherently different, they are perceived as the outcomes of relationships and interactions, that is, these distinctions are not fixed or essential but built by dynamic relationships and contexts. In that sense, Posthumanism acknowledges the multitude of possibilities that exist between these traditional dualisms, thus, it recognizes the complex nature of identities and includes the consideration of interconnected aspects of the world.

Pew's ambiguous and undefinable body questions societal norms and exposes society's tendency to prioritize transparency and sameness over diverse, non-binary identities, which posthumanism addresses by rejecting rigid dualisms and embracing the fluid, interconnected nature of identity. Within the sociological definition of the self framework, if the self is defined by the combination of the inner and societal perspectives, the definition of Pew's identity would become an impossible task.

Pew's cognitive processes shed more light on identifying other characters' identities rather than theirs. Pew is "having trouble lately with remembering" (Lacey 3). As Lacey explains "The person at the center of Pew is an impossibility—a person without qualities, a person whose appearance is changeable, impossible to define" (qtd. in Black Mcculloch). Is Pew a human being? Are they alive? As Han states, identity is directly linked to being alive, and death can be understood as a process that starts the moment someone has no identity:

> Death, understood as the biological end of life, is not the only, or only true, form of death. Death can also be understood as a continuous process in which one gradually loses oneself, one's identity, over the course of a lifetime. In this way, death may begin before death. The identity of a subject is a significantly more complex matter than is suggested by the stable name. (*Capitalism* 9)

As Sara McDowell explains, "Without memory, a sense of self, identity, culture, and heritage is lost" (42). Nevertheless, Pew subverts this classical definition of identity, and thus, the limitation of human beings' identities. As Pew thinks, to be asked "What are you" is "a horrible question to say or hear" (Lacey 8). Why do they need to label themselves? Pew feels they are as human as everyone else, only "missing a few things people seemed to think they needed—a past, a memory of their past, an origin—they had none of that. They felt they weren't the only one, that there must have been others" (27). Pew's self-perceived identity is fluid and resists inclusion in any kind of social category. Their identity is beyond any humanist understanding of human beings; it not only defies traditional binary conceptions of gender and race but also challenges societal expectations and norms. In the context of critical Posthumanism ideals which reject fixed, essentialist views of human identity and embrace the idea of a constantly evolving, hybrid existence suggest that Pew's identity opens up the possibility of a new kind of selfhood, freed from belonging to any specific race, culture, or gender.

Viewed through this lens, identity becomes a struggle between psychological needs and social pressures in pursuit of social approval. In Southern Gothic literature, the obsession with the threat of collapsing racial identities in ante- and postbellum America is particularly

pronounced. This concern echoes the broader Southern Gothic themes that explore societal anxieties. The fear of disintegrating racial identities is deeply ingrained into the core of Southern society, mirroring the predominant preoccupations with the instability of gender, class, ethnicity, and nationality. This thematic connection contributes to the uncanny and unsettling atmosphere characteristic of Southern Gothic narratives, where the disentanglement of identity boundaries becomes a central element of the narrative tension (Edwards, *Gothic Passages* xii).

Nevertheless, it seems that the most problematic mystery for the Christian community around Pew is neither their age nor their race, it is their biological gender, their queerness: "*Now, you might know that some people these days like to think a person gets to decide whether they are a boy or a girl, but we believe, our church believes, and Jesus believed that God decides if you're a boy or a girl*" (Lacey 26). While Pew does not self-identify with any specific gender, I employ the term "queer" to refer to them inclusively, recognizing and accepting all kinds of gender identities beyond the traditional male and female binary. In the context of Gothic fiction, the Gothic genre has been considered as a suitable tool for exploring historically repressed queer sexualities in Western culture. The Gothic text, particularly in its horrific modes, becomes a platform in which the "return of the repressed" includes a focus on sexuality. The Gothic monster can symbolize repressed sexuality in Anglo-American popular culture (Owens 35).

Nonetheless, borrowing Rooney's terminology, who is the "monster" in this "Southern Gothic fable"? Southern Gothic fiction frequently deals with outsiders, utilizing them as a mirror to contrast and highlight the distinctiveness of Southern culture. A broad definition of the Gothic includes a discourse that arises from terror, panic, and anxiety. This discourse uses a rhetoric that provokes certain disgust and functions as a controlling force for establishing cultural norms by means of creating taboos and ruling desires. The Gothic attempts to control depravity at the same time that it acknowledges the impossibility of the task. The Gothic language points to deeply buried anxieties that result in a fear of contamination, once these anxieties are brought to light (Edwards, *Gothic Passages* xii). In the backdrop of these narratives, there is a pervasive sense of imprisonment, whether literal or metaphorical, wherein characters grapple with an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness and confinement. Race and fear serve as intertwined motifs

in many Southern Gothic stories' plots. Small towns, characterized by an evident sense of place, typically serve as the setting in which the South's history is reflected upon.

transparency, silence, the "unspeakable," and symbolic and diabolic language

These dynamics are illustrative of broader social complexities of the present, as so much of contemporary Western society operates within a digital panopticon where information is so easily available that its residents benefit from apparent transparency. As Byung-Chul Han remarks, however, there are fundamental similarities between a society characterized by transparency and a "control society." When information is pervasive, the social structure easily shifts from being based on trust to one built on control and openness. Living in a control society, citizens communicate not out of external imposition, but due to the development of an internal need. This is the consequence of the replacement of fear for desire when exposing one's private life or sphere, and in this way freedom and control merge. The removal of secrecy, strangeness, or otherness is justified in the pursuit of unrestricted communication in the name of transparency (Han, *Capitalism* 29). This control society does not accept how the different, the alien, "the resistance of the other, interferes with and delays the smooth communication of the same" (34). "Transparency" eliminates differences, what does not fit in the system, even if "human beings are not even transparent to themselves" (36). Transparency is demanded and considered compulsory to be a member of the community, as seen when one of the respectable members, Harold H. Grimshaw, harshly criticizes Pew's refusal to answer any questions by claiming that he has nothing to hide and equating silence with guilt: *I've got nothing to hide. . . . I would—I would happily share any of this information with anyone in our community who wanted it. This is all because I love this town and I trust you all and I don't have anything to hide"* (Lacey 134).

The town is looking forward to the mysterious "Forgiveness Festival." The different chapters are structured around the days of the week, from Sunday to Saturday, which corresponds to the eventual date of the Festival. On Sunday, Pew is taken to their home by the family that usually sits in that church pew: Steven, Hilda, and their children: for "*as long as it takes . . . , as long as Pew needs*" (Lacey 16).

Since Pew does not talk to other people, the novel alternates between the monologues that other characters address to Pew, in italics,

and their own thoughts in roman. On their first night at Steven's and Hilda's place, Hilda assures Pew that she is trustworthy and that they can confide in her about their past story, family, and experiences. However, despite Hilda's apparent encouragement, Pew perceives the contradiction between what she says and what she thinks: certain concern in her eyes suggests that in spite of her words, she feels worried about Pew's presence in her home. "Perhaps an honest feeling will always find a way to force itself through" (Lacey 21). This is the first, but not the only example of how the town inhabitants only trust Pew as long as they offer their story to them, as long as they define and demark their identity and demonstrate the extent of their difference or similarity with the villagers. However, as Han claims "to trust someone means that I maintain a positive relationship with him despite my relative ignorance about him. Trust enables me to act in the absence of knowledge. If I already know everything about a person, trust is redundant" (*Capitalism* 24).

Pew's silence hinders communication. The people of the town want information. The community is based on apparent transparency and control, not on trust. They want to control Pew's story since their "strangeness or alterity represent obstacles to limitless communication" (Han, *Capitalism* 29). Not only Hilda, but one after another, all the citizens, when alone with Pew, offer themselves as the recipients of Pew's story: "*We'll need to know where you came from. . . . When were you born? And where? And what happened to your parents, your family? . . . we need to know these things*" (Lacey 27–28). Pew disrupts the norm, and the mystery surrounding them—the impossibility of knowing their origin or history—becomes a source of fear for the townspeople, who perceive them as an "other," a disturbing presence in their midst that "might be contagious or something" (139).

Pew's constant silence and the enigma surrounding their identity echo the Gothic concept of the "unspeakable," as it reveals both as a source of terror for the townspeople and as a representation of the limits of what can be expressed or understood within the narrative. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the unspeakable is characteristic of Gothic literature, often signifying something horrifying but sometimes implying further reflections on the limits of language. The unspeakable influences the way Gothic novels are structured, and also refers to the difficulty of addressing certain topics. It is in the context of the unspeakable or unutterable that "the confessional" can be included.

The confessional constitutes a setting where speech is limited, defining what type of discussions are permitted and what must remain hidden. Sedgwick explains that in classical Gothic novels such as *The Monk*, the confessant must reveal everything, whereas the confessor is bound to secrecy and silence. In this context, the characters must confront the dilemma of whether to confide in others and what is allowed to be spoken (14–15). The unspeakable represents a profound break in communication, a barrier that should not exist, since language ideally should connect people. However, when such a barrier does exist, overcoming it can be an impossible task and can lead to greater emotional distance rather than resolving the issue.

Roger, the local counselor tries to convince Pew to speak. He tells Pew the story of a refugee child named Nelson who had experienced trauma. Roger explains how helping Nelson express his emotions through drawings facilitated his healing process and suggests that Pew, too, may benefit from expressing their feelings. The notion of the connection between silenced speech and trauma is so ingrained in our current society that the inhabitants of the town expect Pew's trauma story. Historian and Cultural Critic Dominick LaCapra contends that post the 9/11 attacks, North America adopted a "wound culture" attitude, characterized by the belief that everyone is either a victim or a survivor. LaCapra highlights the resulting tendency for individuals and communities to mistakenly perceive images and narratives of others' pain as reflections of their own, potentially non-existent trauma (Vinci 2). This is why Roger emphasizes to Pew the importance of addressing internal struggles and the challenges of remaining silent.

But language does not always build bridges for communication, it can separate rather than unite people. As Han affirms, language, as a means of communication, has two distinct functions—symbolic and diabolic. The symbolic function connects and communicates. The symbolic dimension of language allows people to share ideas, and foster relationships and community, while the diabolic side of language involves separating and causing harm, and even perpetuating violence. It is a use of language that excludes, degrades, or manipulates. It is the potential of language to damage relationships, undermine trust, and create social divides. In the current context of societal changes, linguistic violence emerges, characterized by actions like defamation, discrediting, and

degradation (Han, *Topology* 52–53). This violence is based on negativity that is directed towards negating the other. This violence is different from the traditional one: it arises from the accumulation of the same, from the accumulation of similarities in contrast to otherness. As Emmanual Levinas's concept of the self suggests, even when defining oneself there is the tendency to exclude or negate the other. This exclusion becomes a way for an individual to establish their identity by keeping the other at a distance (Han, *Topology* 105). From being a tool that connects people by sharing ideas, feelings, and information, language, or the lack of language, in this case, separates—divides—Pew from the townspeople. It is the power of "the unspeakable":

> The unspeakable here is an interpersonal barrier where no barrier ought to be-language is properly just the medium that should flow between people, mitigating their physical and psychic separateness-but once this barrier has come into being, it is breached only at the cost of violence and deepened separateness. (Sedgwick 17)

On Monday, just two days after Pew appeared in the church pew asleep, Hilda and Steve do not trust leaving them alone in the house during the day, that is apparently the reason for the beginning of Pew's house-to-house pilgrimage. In fact, each visit is an excuse for someone to spend some time alone with Pew. People project onto Pew. It is the trope of the Gothic confessional (Sedgwick 15). Pew's silence seems to encourage everyone to confess their stories to them. On the first day, they go to Mrs. Gladstone's place and then to Roger's. Mrs. Gladstone reminisces about her past when she married Charles, a widower older than her. Mrs. Gladstone's narrative takes a somber turn when she recalls the moment when her husband was diagnosed with a terminal illness. Charles, on his deathbed, confesses how in his youth he collaborated in the hanging of four black men. As he does not die immediately, he has the time to confess more crimes and secrets, leaving his wife with the uncertainty of not knowing the true identity of the man who was her husband for several years (Lacey 32–38). This highlights the complexity of understanding someone's true nature and the dark undertones of this perfect transparent community. Mrs Gladstone verbalizes

some unspeakable story, a sin, and the guilt of being the wife of a racist murderer and not turning him in. But Pew may reveal nothing.

Pew experiences this feeling of the unspeakable, because they are unable to express with words what they feel: "It began to seem possible that a person might have pains and thoughts that resisted language and had to be transfigured through an instrument, turned into pure sound, spun into the air, and heard" (Lacey 167). In the communicative act between Pew and the people in the town, there is also something unspeakable, silence, in the things that the supposedly transparent citizens do not express. They remain silent about what cannot be told; they do not confess their major sin: the true nature of the approaching Festival. Language appears in its diabolic side, borrowing Han terminology, when it fails to connect Pew with others. On the one hand, it limits Pew because their personal experiences are impossible to communicate through words, and on the other hand, because although people talk to Pew, they do not rely on the symbolic function of language, there is no connection, they do not build bridges between Pew and them because their silence hides the most dreadful events in the novel. As Pew thinks: "No matter what anyone tries, no matter how many words accumulate, there is always that absence. I stayed silent" (Lacey 176). The eventual result of this failure in communication and the accumulation of unspeakable things is misunderstanding, and, ultimately, violence.

Communication flows only one way, and Pew, who does not use language, is the only one who understands and can see through the citizens' words what they do not say:

> I don't know how it is I can sometimes see all these things in people—see these silent things in people—and though it has been helpful, I think, at times, so often it feels like an affliction, to see through those masks meant to protect a person's wants and unmet needs. People wear those masks for a reason, like river dams and jar lids have a reason. (Lacey 166)

Not only people's silence, but words and all the confessions people direct at Pew represent a diabolic use of language, because, in the end, after emptying their sins onto Pew, Pew's alienation increases.

Pew is excluded, and negated, in the process of the other citizens' definition. The community's expectation for Pew is to be assimilated

and normalized, as Nelson, the traumatized child, was: *"Now Nelson is a very easygoing guy. . . . [H]e's still quiet, but he's calm"* (Lacey 44), but the prerequisite for Pew to be welcome and accepted is the sharing of their story, their expected trauma narrative. Without their story, Pew's silence threatens the community, they cannot be their saviors (Black Mcculloch).

However, Nelson is simply pretending as a way to cope. He expresses a desire to leave and never return to the town. In his conversation with Pew, he reveals his tension and discomfort and the story of how his family was killed *"in the name of God, and now these people want me to sing a hymn like it was all some kind of misunderstanding"* (Lacey 52). At the core of Nayar's concept of posthumanist personhood is the idea that it embraces diversity by underscoring the shared vulnerability among bodies and subjectivities (4). The immediate connection between Nelson and Pew may be interpreted in light of their shared vulnerability. Nelson expresses concerns for Pew to be in the current situation, a situation that seems to be dangerous for them. Nelson's advice for Pew is not to talk: *"They hear what they want. The more you say, the more they'll use it against you"* (Lacey 53). In this context, language could perform its diabolical function and contribute to Pew's exclusion and negation.

A major theme for Southern Gothic writers hinges on innocence and the innocent's place in the world—where they are often asked to act as redeemer. William Faulkner's innocent is the mentally handicapped Benji from *The Sound and the Fury*; Carson McCullers's the deaf-mute John Singer. But this is still a genre of love and loss. In the end, purity of heart rarely overpowers desperation (Harpo).

The role of the innocent in Southern Gothic works is very often that of the redeemer. However, the purity of heart in innocent characters seldom triumphs over the persistent sense of decay in Southern Gothic narratives.

INNOCENCE AND SACRIFICE

According to Merriam-Webster, innocence encompasses primarily three multifaceted dimensions. In the legal realm, an innocent individual has not transgressed the law and, as a result, is relieved from legal consequences. Secondly, extending beyond the breaking of the law, innocence takes on a moral dimension, representing a state of goodness achieved through unfamiliarity with evil. In this sense, an innocent

person possesses a purity of character. Lastly, innocence may manifest as a lack of knowledge or ignorance, indicating an unawareness of certain facts ("Innocence").

Innocence is usually constructed in retrospect because it only becomes evident when lost or threatened. Innocence essentially rejects the idea of being haunted or disturbed. Rather, it involves a deliberate rejection of the idea that any individual's actions have an effect on the fate of others, even if there is evidence to the contrary. This kind of innocence is always threatened, haunted (Redding 107). As Joanne Faulkner explains, innocence, exemplified in the child, symbolizes a lost past, reminding the community of a time they consider precious. The innocent represents carefree unawareness, allowing adults to project and relieve their own worries onto the child's innocence. The "innocent child" becomes a living link to the past and a source of relief for the community's concerns (127–28).

According to SAND, innocence is characterized by openness—a willingness to observe and trust, even when faced with something that might initially appear untrustworthy.[3] Pew does not cease to observe and trust, even when they notice the changes in the way the people of the town behave toward him. From the sharing of their stories to guilty silence, a total break in communication: "HILDA DROVE IN SILENCE. Whatever had made it possible for her to look into my eyes, it seemed, had now expired" (Lacey 154). Nevertheless, genuine innocence is not synonymous with naiveté or delusion, thus, Pew is the factual embodiment of innocence—open to the designs of others and willing to extend trust, even when they are unable to reciprocate, even if innocence involves vulnerability: "the willingness to be innocent is the willingness to be hurt. Vulnerability takes more courage than being cynical, strong, or powerful. It takes courage to be open, innocent, and willing to be hurt"(SAND). Pew is consciously the innocent vulnerable child on the hands of the adults willing to recover some state of lost purity: "I could almost remember a feeling, and old feeling, the feeling of what it's like to be so small that anyone could just pick you up and take you somewhere. . . . [W]hat a terror a body must live through. It's a wonder there are people at all" (Lacey 31).

Pew meets a keen person: Annie, and finds a personal affinity with her because "outsiders recognize outsiders" (Lacey qtd. in Nesler). Even if Annie is the daughter of one of the respectable members of

the community, Kitty, she does not fit in the rigid community scheme of transparent identities without secrets, as she reflects: "Sometimes I think that nobody is just one person, that actually we're a bunch of different people and we have to figure out how to get them all to cooperate and fool everyone else into thinking that we're just one person" (Lacey 147). Annie meditates on the notion that people are not unique and consistent beings but rather are made up of different facets or multiple personas. The difficult thing for Annie is to find a way to manage her different personalities and make them converge. Thus, following Layder's dual vision of identity in its combination of psychological and social needs, she acknowledges how the requirement to belong, to present an acceptable external version of their identity, makes people reveal or hide different aspects of themselves to create a socially acceptable image.

The Festival is, apparently, the most important social event for the inhabitants of that city, the bond that keeps them all united. The ominous fearful background atmosphere is created for the readers by the approaching date of the mysterious festival:

> the festival is what sets our community apart from other communities in the area. It's one of the ways we've decided to actively reconcile with our past, unite both sides of our community, and acknowledge that everyone—every single one of us—everyone is born broken. . . . And what He told them was to have a special day every year for everyone to confess all their sins together—out loud—so that we all understand that we're all sinful. (Lacey 159)

It is in the festival where the connection with the epigraph from LeGuin's short story is eventually discovered when readers are confronted with "a utilitarian dilemma, forced to embrace its discomfort, and respond to its challenge" (Smernoff). For some of the members of the community, as affirmed by a fervent Christian old woman, Pew is "*our new Jesus*," the innocent to be sacrificed for the common well-being (Lacey 184). Pew's persistent silence had triggered a variety of confessions, gossip, and life stories, in which the townspeople had consistently projected their views and prejudices onto the blank space facilitated by Pew. People's eventual reaction was full of accusations of malevolence towards Pew's passivity and quietness. Furthermore, Pew is an incongruence, someone that cannot be, a reminder of otherness, a source of cultural anxiety and

disposable: "MOST PEOPLE AROUND HERE *are not fond of strangers,
you know. I probably don't need to tell you*" (Lacey 99).

In this context, Pew's unexpected arrival during the Festival week
is perceived as a profound disturbance, a significant premonition, inten-
sifying the community's uneasiness. The genuine essence of the festival
becomes discernible through occasional textual clues:

> *Strange you showed up this week of all the times you could have.
> Now, I don't know what anyone has told you yet about this week-
> end, but it's nothing to worry about. . . . People get a little anxious I
> suppose. Start acting out. It's just human nature* (Lacey 55).

According to Han, Rituals are a means to "stabilize life" (Han, *Rituals* 3):

> Rituals are processes of embodiment and bodily performances.
> In them, the valid order and values of a community are phys-
> ically experienced and solidified. They are written into the
> body, incorporated, that is, physically internalized. Thus, ritu-
> als create a bodily knowledge and memory, an embodied iden-
> tity, a bodily connection. A ritual community is a communal
> body. (Han, *Rituals* 11)

Han claims that rituals involve the body; they are performances that
require physical activity. It is in this way that rituals are internalized
and "written" in the body, fostering a physical connection within the
community. The community engaged in the ritual is a collective entity,
a communal body that shares this experience and becomes united, shar-
ing a sense of identity. Those who do not participate in the Festival
do not belong to this communal identity and body, such as those who
become the material for sacrifice. As Mr. Kercher, an old man who
came to the town only because his daughter was married to someone
from the community, affirms:

> *A belief in divinity makes possible in this world is a right toward
> cruelty—the belief in an afterlife being the real life . . . , not here.
> People need a sense of righteousness to take things from others . . . ,
> to carry out violence. Divinity gives them that. It creates the reins
> for cruelty.* (Lacey 126)

The good-hearted citizens of this Southern town may feel justified in
committing violence in their earthly life, and they still maintain a sense

of righteousness based on their higher moral authority and their belief in the afterlife where their actions will be vindicated: "*it's the sin we've all done together. Something we had to do even though it was evil*" (Lacey 205).

During the festival ceremony, congregants wash themselves of sins by reading aloud the names of the "disappeared"—victims of past ceremonies. Meanwhile, an innocent child queries her father about the significance of these names, marking the child's ritual initiation:

> *Whose names?*
> *Of the dead.*
> *All the dead?*
> *Some of them.*
> *Which ones?*
> The adult hesitated. The child listened intently, as if she
>   might be able to
> decode what was happening. She stared at the ceiling. She
>   was learning
> how to live.
> *Which ones?* she whispered again.
> *The ones who were killed.*
> *Today?*
> *No, not today. In years past.* (Lacey 205)

As Han explains, in some archaic societies, life and death are not perceived as separate or contradictory forces, rather, they coexist in a dynamic and interconnected relationship through symbolic rituals and transitions: "Rituals of initiation and sacrifice are symbolic acts which regulate numerous transitions from life to death. Initiation is a second birth, following upon death, that is, the end of a phase of life. The relationship between life and death is characterized by reciprocity" (Han, *Violence* 51). Pew is gone, and "No one knows where I went, and I don't know where I went and I don't know where Annie went or where you went, but I know that I went and was gone and was gone completely" (Lacey 206).

Inequality, belonging, prejudice, identity all these issues are blurred when confronted with infinity. Bauman contends that only infinity possesses the capacity for true inclusivity. Infinity and exclusion are fundamentally incompatible, as are infinity and exemption. Within the vast expanse of time and space, every conceivable occurrence is not only possible but inevitable. Everything that has been, is, and may yet come

into existence finds its rightful place. In the realm of infinity, individual humans may fade from mortal view, yet none irreversibly descends into nothingness. Every judgment, with the exception of the infinitely distant final one, is premature. To claim any judgment as conclusive before the ultimate endpoint is not only presumptuous but a testament to deception or sinful conceit. The concept of infinity symbolizes an envisioned extension of the present wherein the significance of all past, current, and future moments unfolds, and everything seamlessly aligns (Bauman 94–95). And it is precisely in an untimed space with unlimited possibilities in which Pew has felt they belong: "I hadn't come here, I knew then. I had always been here, and I knew I had always been here but I didn't say that. I hadn't needed even to be born here because I had always been here; I hadn't needed to be born at all" (Lacey 157).

Pew's sense of belonging in an untimed space with unlimited possibilities reflects the idea that eventually, within infinity, every conceivable occurrence finds its rightful place:

> I leaned back across the table and shut my eyes and thought that at some point in the future, long after humanity had run its course, after some other creature had replaced us, maybe, or maybe even after the next creatures had been replaced by whatever came after them, at some point in a future I could not fully imagine, a question might occur in some mind, and that question might be *What was the human? What was the world of the human?*—though it would be in some unforeseen language, perhaps a language that was without sound, perhaps a language that did not have to grow from a damp, contaminated mouth. (Lacey 91).

Pew has always been there; perhaps their identity is the communal one—Pew is the town itself, all of them, those who remain and those "who walked away." Or perhaps their identity, a posthuman one, could not be defined because it resides outside of any time, place, or language.

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NOTES

1. David Buckel committed suicide by self-immolation as a protest to raise awareness about climate change. Some people would define this action as a form of martyrdom, or sacrifice, others as the failure of a performance (Scrimer).

2. According to Parfit, personal identity is not a matter of having a unique, unchangeable, and constant self. Instead, he argues that personal identity can be understood in terms of psychological continuity and connectedness, including memories, personality traits, and consciousness (Parfit 3–4).

3. The SAND (Science and Non-Duality) community is a global network that explores the connections among science, philosophy, and spirituality, with a particular interest in non-duality and consciousness. The community is formed by a diverse group of scientists, philosophers, spiritual teachers, and practitioners, who come together to discuss and investigate how modern scientific understanding and ancient spiritual wisdom can inform and enrich one another.

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