


# FROM A FEMALE GOTHIC HEROINE TO A POSTFEMINIST GOTHIC VILLAINESS: THE AMBIVALENT CHARACTERIZATION OF THE YOUNG FEMALE PROTAGONIST IN TI WEST'S *PEARL*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** American filmmaker Ti West has recently released a horror trilogy in which actress Mia Goth simultaneously plays the roles of Maxine, in the first and third parts of the trilogy, and of Pearl, in the first and second parts. After the release of the first film in the series, *X* (2022), and as a prequel to it, West's second film *Pearl* (2022) focuses on the youth of its protagonist. Initially, the plot presents many of the conventions pertaining to the tradition of the female gothic, and particularly, to its first stage of development, in analogy with narratives that depict a young heroine who is threatened with confinement and struggles to escape in order to join the man she loves and find her lost parent. Conversely, West's film *Pearl* also displays illustrative traits of the postfeminist gothic, inasmuch as it involves a rupture with the tradition of the female gothic, since postfeminist gothic narratives encompass popular evocations of girl power, postmodern discussions of feminism, and political discourses of neoliberal individualism. This article aims to analyse the ambivalent character of Pearl in a contemporary cinematic narrative that blends features from the female gothic tradition and the postfeminist gothic, thus portraying Pearl as gender-compliant, but also, gender-subversive.

**Keywords:** female gothic; postfeminist gothic; heroine; villainess; aging; intertextuality.

## DE HEROÍNA DEL GÓTICO FEMENINO A VILLANA GÓTICA POSFEMINISTA: LA CARACTERIZACIÓN AMBIVALENTE DE LA JOVEN PROTAGONISTA FEMENINA EN *PEARL* DE TI WEST

**Resumen:** El cineasta estadounidense Ti West ha estrenado recientemente una trilogía de terror en la que la actriz Mia Goth interpreta simultáneamente los papeles de Maxine, en la primera y tercera entrega, y de Pearl, en la primera y segunda. Tras el estreno de la primera película de la saga, *X* (2022), y como precuela de la misma, la segunda película de West, *Pearl* (2022), se centra en la juventud de su protagonista. Inicialmente, la trama presenta muchas de las convenciones propias de la tradición gótica femenina y, en particular, de su primera etapa de desarrollo, en analogía con relatos que retratan a una joven heroína amenazada con la reclusión, que lucha por escapar para reunirse con el hombre que ama y que encuentra a su padre o madre desaparecidos. Por el contrario, la

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<sup>1</sup> Recommended Citation: Miquel-Baldellou, Marta. "From a Female Gothic Heroine to a Postfeminist Gothic Villainess: The Ambivalent Characterisation of the Young Female Protagonist in Ti West's *Pearl*." *Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 14, no. 1, 2026, pp. 1-20.  
<https://reunido.uniovi.es/index.php/jaclr/index>

película *Pearl* de West también muestra rasgos característicos del gótico posfeminista, en la medida en que implica una ruptura con la tradición del gótico femenino, ya que las narrativas góticas posfeministas abarcan evocaciones populares del empoderamiento femenino, debates posmodernos sobre el feminismo y discursos políticos del individualismo neoliberal. Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar el carácter ambivalente de *Pearl* en una narrativa cinematográfica contemporánea que combina elementos de la tradición gótica femenina y del gótico posfeminista, retratando así a Pearl como a una figura que se ajusta a la par que subvierte las convenciones de género. Palabras clave: gótico femenino; gótico posfeminista; heroína; villana; madurez; intertextualidad.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

American director Ti West has recently given rise to a horror cinematic trilogy as a result of his interest to explore diverse genre conventions and visual styles pertaining to different subgenres in horror cinema. The first film of the series *X*, released in the year 2022, pays homage to slasher fiction and revolves around a film crew, including a young aspirant actress named Maxine, who travel to a rural area in Texas in the year 1979 to shoot a film in an isolated farm run by aged hosts, Howard and Pearl. The next film in the saga, entitled *Pearl* and also released in the year 2022, is truly a prequel of the previous film, insofar as, having introduced the character of Pearl as an elderly character in the first film of the saga, this second film focuses on Pearl's youth in the aftermath of the First World War. Finally, in the last film of the trilogy, *Maxine*, which was released in the year 2024, the plot reverts to the plot of the first film of the saga and focuses on Maxine as the final girl who survived, as she moves to Hollywood in the year 1985 to pursue a career in showbusiness.

Throughout this trilogy, actress Mia Goth plays the dual role of Maxine and Pearl. In the first film of the saga, which is set in the late 1970s, Goth plays both Maxine and Pearl as an elderly woman, wearing prosthetic make-up for age effects. Conversely, in the second film of the trilogy, which is set in the first quarter of the twentieth century, Goth only plays the role of Pearl, but in her youth. Finally, in the third film of the saga, which is set in the 1980s, Goth only plays the role of Maxine taking over the plot of the first film. The fact that the same actress plays a double part throughout the trilogy brings to the fore the intrinsic relatedness of the characters of Maxine and Pearl insofar as, despite being portrayed as antagonists in the first film—as young and old, and victim and victimizer, respectively—they are both depicted as women with ambitious aspirations to

succeed in showbusiness, who must face the gender and age prejudice of their respective times.

In particular, the second film in West's trilogy, *Pearl*, deploys the conventions of the female gothic tradition, but also incorporates tenets pertaining to postfeminist gothic. As its plots unfolds, the film revolves around a young heroine, Pearl who lives with her parents in their isolated farm in Texas, while her husband Howard (Alistair Sewell) serves in the First World War. Pearl's father (Matthew Sunderland) is prostrated in a wheelchair and he is unable to speak or show any affection as a result of having contracted the Spanish flu in the past. Conversely, Pearl's mother (Tandi Wright) subjects her daughter to strict surveillance as a result of her stern and puritanical upbringing. To evade herself from her bleak reality, Pearl fantasizes about becoming a chorus girl or a film star, while she also shows latent signs of repressed rage and violence. Upon meeting a cinema projectionist (David Corenswet) and attending an audition in the company of her sister-in-law Mitsy (Emma Jenkins-Purro), Pearl has the opportunity of daydreaming about making her dreams come true.

The portrayal of Pearl as a character complies with the characterization of the heroine in female gothic narratives, particularly as the film portrays Pearl's confinement in the family home, her conflicts with the mother and father figures, her sexual awakening, and her process of coming of age. In addition, Pearl's depiction also conforms to the heroine in postfeminist gothic narratives, especially in her paradigmatic resignification of femininity, gender skepticism, and sexuality. West's *Pearl* can be analysed as a contemporary film that revisits the tenets pertaining to the tradition of the female gothic, but also incorporates features comprised in the postfeminist gothic, thus considering it as a case of hybridization of both subgenres in the gothic tradition from the perspective of gender studies. West's trilogy portrays Pearl as a postfeminist gothic protagonist, showing both similarities and divergences in relation to the female gothic tradition. As contemporary cinematic narratives, the three films portray diverse approaches to the postfeminist gothic genre through the intertextual metafiction that West establishes using myths, films, and fairy tales.

## 2. REVISITING THE FEMALE GOTHIC: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Ti West's film *Pearl* revolves around its young female protagonist along her process of coming of age in a domestic setting where she must struggle between

complying with the prescribed roles of gender as a dutiful young woman and giving free vent to her ambitious aspirations to become a cinema actress. According to Ellen Moers, who was the first theorist to coin the term female gothic, this genre involves “the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic” (90). Accordingly, narratives of the female gothic mostly address fears and anxieties befalling young women, as they feel obliged to adjust themselves to social expectations in relation to the discourses of gender and aging. West’s film *Pearl* is grounded in the basis of these precepts as regards the female gothic, insofar as its heroine feels subjected to the prescribed roles of gender and aging that she is assigned as a young female adult. Moreover, as Diana Wallace (2016) notes, drawing on Moers’s theorizations, it is possible to identify two phases of development of the female gothic. As Wallace claims, a first stage of the female gothic comprises narratives, such as Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), which focus on “a heroine who is threatened with imprisonment in a castle or a great house by a male tyrant (often a father or father substitute), and who escapes through labyrinthine passages and sublime landscape to marry the man she loves, and often, find her lost mother” (232). Subsequently, in a second stage of development, female gothic narratives address the birth myth, like in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), thus bringing together “the Romantic and Faustian motif of the male over-reacher [...] and the horrors of maternity” (232). Given these two phases of development of the female gothic, West’s film mostly delves into the first stage, since Pearl copes with anxieties derived from parental conflicts and her will to escape domesticity to find love and success. Nevertheless, the film also delves into horrors derived from motherhood, as Pearl’s mother realizes that not only is Pearl willing to relinquish her responsibilities as a dutiful daughter, but also that her daughter conceals some evil nature which urges her to release her murderous instincts.

Pearl lives with her tetraplegic father and her strict mother in an isolated farm in the Texan country, although she is also a newlywed wife whose husband left her to serve in the First World War. As a female gothic narrative, West’s film addresses Pearl’s disenchantment with domestic life and the disillusionment of her expectations in relation to marriage. Upon reflecting on gothic novels for women with a majority of female readership, Tania Modleski draws attention to differences and analogies which may be established between the romance and the gothic formula. She states that in romance novels, the heroine’s feelings shift from fear to love, whereas, in gothic narratives, they

transform from love into fear. Additionally, Modleski explains, if the preoccupation lies in meeting and falling in love with a man in romance novels, the concern is rather about gaining insight into the relationship once the union has already been established in gothic textualities (59-61). Conversely, as Modleski adds, in both romance and gothic narratives, women may feel identified with the heroine's innocence as a victim, but also with her hostility towards men as a victimizer (66). It could thus be claimed that the female gothic arises as a blending of romance and gothic narratives, particularly regarding the ambivalent portrayal of the heroine in the female gothic. In West's film, Pearl misses Howard, while she must take responsibility for taking care of her parents and the farm on her own, but she also scorns him for having abandoned her to go to the war, hence displaying a dual role between a submissive and a defiant wife.



Besides, as a female gothic narrative, West's film addresses the young heroine's unresolved personal conflicts, her masochistic identification with her mother, and her search for an absent father's substitute. Pearl has the uncanny sensation that the past is repeating itself through her, as she establishes a strong identification with her mother's situation as an older woman trapped in domesticity and subdued by her the duties she owes to her paralyzed husband. In female gothic narratives, the heroine internalizes the dynamics of the parental interaction whereby "one of the parents is perceived as omnipotent and domineering, while the other is perceived [...] as submissive and victimised by the stronger partner" (Modleski 66). Nonetheless, in West's film, given Pearl's father's invalid condition, Ruth arises as the most overbearing partner, although she still remains subjected to him as a result of her marital duties and her husband's dependent condition. In addition, from a psychoanalytic perspective, for both the female and male child, the mother represents the first and strongest attachment. Nonetheless, if the boy accomplishes his separation from the mother by identifying with his rival, that is, his father, the girl, in contrast, may only separate from her mother by making her rival,

that is, her father, her figurative lover. In this respect, in female gothic narratives, “the lover plays the ‘father,’ and the heroine either suspects him of having killed his first wife or else fears that her own relationship with him will be a repetition of one which occurred in the past” (Modleski 76). Accordingly, the heroine’s lover turns into a father’s substitute, although she has suspicions about her lover’s past and fears that she might become another of his victims. In West’s film, while her husband is in the battlefield and her father is prostrated, Pearl finds a father substitute in her lover, a cinema projectionist, who seduces her with his false promises. In female gothic narratives, “only after the heroine has obtained ‘absolute proof’ of the man’s innocence can ‘oedipal conflicts’ be resolved and reconciliation with the father become possible; [and] only then can identification with the victimised ‘mother’ be broken” (Modleski 76-7). Nonetheless, in the film, once Pearl unveils her lover’s deceit, Pearl feels obliged to resume her former role in the family home, thus ratifying her initial fears of repetition and castration.

In Julian Fleenor’s seminal volume on the female gothic, scholar Joanna Russ (1983) configures the formulaic plot that often recurs in female gothic narratives, which West’s film *Pearl* revisits, but also subverts. In an isolated and detached house, a young and inexperienced heroine feels lonely, while she is often unaware of her special inner gifts and talents. In the family home, the heroine must conventionally cope with a wicked stepmother or a demanding selfish mother, and an absent or ineffectual father whom she loves. Likewise, the heroine establishes a connection with an older man, who exerts his influence on her, and for whom the heroine feels both attracted and fearful—Russ refers to him as the super-male (invariably guiltless even if he may appear otherwise) and the shadow-male (presented as gentle and protective, but revealed to be a villain) (34)—while he presents her with the opportunity to escape her stifling situation. By means of her bond with this man, the heroine perceives the presence of another woman who arises as the heroine’s double, since, if the heroine is innocent and submissive, the other woman is usually daring and flirtatious. Moreover, in relation to the older man and the other woman, the heroine gains insight into a buried ominous secret, which is eventually untangled and allows the heroine to ascertain the older man’s identity as super-male or shadow-male, and herself as different from the other woman. West’s *Pearl* mostly follows this recurrent formulaic plot in female gothic narratives, insofar as Pearl feels trapped in her family’s farm, she is subjected to her stern mother’s rules, while her father only remains a latent presence as he is paralyzed and unable to speak. When Pearl meets a cinema projectionist

in town, she feels both attracted and frightened, but she chooses him as a feasible candidate to substitute her father figure, particularly in absence of her husband. Upon meeting the projectionist, Pearl feels more prone to release her repressed self and indulge in her ambitious dreams of becoming an actress, thus giving rise to the figurative character of the other woman, who is sexually active in contrast with Pearl's apparently innocent personality. Nonetheless, when Pearl unmasks the projectionist's actual intentions and identifies him as a shadow-male rather than a super-male, to use Russ's terminology, Pearl must reconcile herself with the idea of joining her husband, who returns home from the war, and of resuming her place in the family home.

Even though West's film *Pearl* pays homage to the formulaic plot that often recurs in the female gothic, it also presents significant divergences that move toward contemporary interpretations of the traditional formula of the female gothic. In the film, Pearl arises as both the heroine and the other woman, thus subverting the assignation of opposed traits to each of the female characters as is usually the case in the tradition of the female gothic. Conversely, Pearl is able to identify the projectionist and her husband separately as the shadow-male and the super-male, even if, in most female gothic narratives, the heroine identifies these roles in one single male character, as the man whom the heroine believes to be the shadow-male is ultimately unmasked as the super-male. In addition, heroines in female gothic narratives usually aspire to find love, whereas, in West's film, Pearl rather dreams of making a career in showbusiness as a cinema actress and leaving behind her assigned roles as both daughter and wife in the domestic space. Besides, if the heroine finally joins the hero in female gothic narratives and the story comes full circle after unravelling all the hidden secrets, in *Pearl*, the eventual family reunion is far from evoking bliss, but it rather projects a grotesque and macabre picture as Pearl welcomes her husband in the living room with a putrid feast and the decomposing bodies of her parents sitting at the table. Finally, Pearl moves from personifying the characters of heroines and other woman to embodying the figure of a female psychokiller who rebels against her assigned roles and, rather than being interested in finding love, she is particularly eager to fulfil her professional ambitions and make a career of her own. Consequently, despite complying with many of the tenets of the formulaic plot in the tradition of the female gothic, West's film also reflects features pertaining to the postfeminist gothic in the twenty-first century.

### 3. POSTFEMINIST GOTHIC: FROM FEMININITY TO FEMINISM, AND BEYOND

Even if West's film *Pearl* revisits, but also transforms, the tenets of the tradition of the female gothic, it mostly complies with the precepts that have been associated with postfeminist gothic. Contemporary theorists that have reflected on the features pertaining to postfeminist gothic that take divergent stances in regard to the way postfeminist gothic narratives depart from the female gothic tradition. Firstly, according to scholars like Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith, postfeminist gothic arises as a variant of the female gothic on the grounds that, even if postfeminist gothic narratives aim to reinterpret gender structures, their young heroines often find themselves unable to escape from them. In the film, Pearl often rebels against established prescriptions of gender, but she fails to overcome them and often feels obliged to resume her confining role in the domestic space. Secondly, theorists like Benjamin Brabon and Stéphanie Genz rather argue that postfeminist gothic involves a rupture with the tradition of the female gothic. In West's film, Pearl is portrayed as a young woman with determined aspirations and boundless ambitions who dares to defy parental authority and confining gender prescriptions to fulfil her dreams to become an actress even if this implies incurring in criminal behavior. Thirdly, scholars like Diane Long Hoeveler note the ambivalent characterization of the heroine in postfeminist gothic narratives, insofar as she displays ambiguous dynamics of passivity and aggressiveness which verge on some metaphorical sadomasochistic practices. In the film, Pearl swaps her roles between victim and victimizer, as she turns into the object of chastisement under parental rule, but she also arises as subject who vindicates herself as a result of subjugation. A close analysis of West's film gives evidence of the fact that it exemplifies these three established approaches to postfeminist gothic, thus categorizing the film as an exponent of contemporary postfeminist gothic.

### 4. EXPOSING SUBORDINATION AND VICTIMHOOD IN POST-FEMINIST GOTHIC

Insofar as postfeminist gothic narratives still rely on female gothic tradition, scholars like Wallace and Smith position postfeminist gothic as a subset within the female gothic. In particular, as Genz claims, postfeminist gothic textualities often display that "the resignifications of femininity cannot rid themselves of the threat of phallogentricity" and "the spectre of heterosexism, as they still function within the same cultural imagery" (73). Accordingly, even if categorized as postfeminist gothic narratives, they still replicate women's subordinate position, they become complicit with female victimhood, and they may even recreate cultural anxieties about women's domestic situation under patriarchy.

This approach to postfeminist gothic interpreted as a category within female gothic is displayed in several scenes in West's film, as Pearl is portrayed as a gothic heroine entrapped in domesticity. The cultural legacy of the female gothic is particularly perceived in the characterization of the confining house, the puritanical ethics prevailing in the family, the contextual praise of traditional femininity, the haunting patriarchal dictates, and the pervasive sense of female failure and victimhood.

As an only child, Pearl is compelled to take responsibility for the domestic chores and everyday jobs at the family farm, thus spending most of her days toiling in permanent detachment from the world. Given the bleak reality in which she feels trapped, Pearl finds some relief in indulging in daydreaming and personal fantasies to become a cinema actress. In order to give free vent to her illusions, she feels obliged to lock her door as she puts on some make up and clothes to escape her mother's constant supervision. Pearl is only allowed to leave the family house momentarily to go to the village and run the errands that her mother assigns to her. It is on these occasions when Pearl takes the opportunity to sneak in the theatre and watch musicals while picturing herself on the screen with the rest of dancers. However, when Pearl's mother finds out where she has been, she reprimands her daughter harshly and punishes her for daring venture into public spaces where a young decent woman is not allowed. In addition, during the last years of the First World War, in the midst of the Spanish flu pandemic, Pearl's act of sneaking into public spaces acquires not only morally—but also literally—endangering proportions, as she may contract the flu and infect her parents as a result of disobeying their rules.

Pearl's parents are of German descent who have been raised in the ethos of pietism, puritanism, austerity, and strict observance of the sacred texts. Pearl's mother, Ruth, feels particularly concerned to pass on her religious education to her daughter and subjects her to an atmosphere of sternness and severity which Pearl is often in difficulty to tolerate. Likewise, parental ethics and religious fervor find reflection in the frugal decoration of the wooden house in which they live, the observance of silence and discretion, and the repression of bodily instincts to favor the improvement of the spirit. As a young woman, Pearl feels alienated in her own home as she finds such strict atmosphere as gloomy and miserable in comparison with her aspirations to feature in a musical and work in showbusiness.



Insofar as the film is set during the last years of the First World War, in a context of poverty and sacrifice, women were left at home, while the men were serving the nation in the battlefield with their own lives at stake. Accordingly, in rural settings, women felt obliged to work in the field and the farm to make a living of their own during the absence of their husbands, but they were also obliged to preserve the ethics of womanhood prevailing at the time for which they were alleged to deserve national praise. As Howard is fighting in the war, Pearl stays home to take care of her parents, but also to carry out the daily jobs that are required so that the farm keeps on producing its goods and provides the family with food in the harshest times. Despite the physically demanding jobs that she must implement, Pearl takes good care of her appearance in order to preserve her femininity, and even if she still wears overalls when she goes to the village to buy some medicine for her father, her hairstyle with white laces displays her wish to emphasize her docile femininity in spite of the circumstances. Nonetheless, behind her apparent gentleness and innocence as values associated with traditional femininity, Pearl conceals a latent aggressive sexuality that awaits to emerge.

Although Pearl is mostly confined in the family farm and under her mother's strict surveillance, she feels permanently haunted by the effects of patriarchal dictates. As a result of Howard's absence, Pearl must bear the responsibility of running the house, caring for her parents, and carrying out the daily chores at the farm. Likewise, being a young wife, she is deprived of sharing the conjugal bed with her husband, which subjects her to a regime of chastity and sexual abstention. Since Pearl's father is tetraplegic and unable to speak as a result of having contracted the Spanish flu in the past, Pearl is compelled to take care of him as he is totally dependent on others. Accordingly, even if the patriarch in the family has been apparently deprived of his authority as a result of his diseased condition, he still exerts his power, as Pearl is obliged to devote herself to his

care. Finally, when Pearl meets the cinema projectionist and he considers her the innocent and gentle girl she appears to be, he seduces her by making her believe he will take her to Paris and will help her fulfil her dreams of becoming a cinema actress. Accordingly, Pearl is subjected to patriarchal dictates on behalf of her husband, her father, and her lover.

Finally, as indicative of the anxieties about women's domestic situation, Pearl is also constantly exposed to a haunting sense of female victimhood and failure, particularly on behalf of her own mother. When Ruth becomes aware of her daughter's intention to abandon them in the farm and make a career in showbusiness, she discourages Pearl on account of the fact that she is bound to fail. Ruth also reprimands her daughter, as she believes Pearl has aspirations and delusions of grandeur above her class and condition. In this respect, as a preserver of the ethics of gender, Ruth diminishes Pearl's aspirations to make a career of her own and move beyond her assigned place in the family and the farm. Likewise, Ruth also blames her daughter for believing herself better than her own mother and able to aspire to a better sort of life. Accordingly, West's film also underpins that women entrapped in patriarchy also play a part in disseminating patriarchal assumptions that limit women's expectations and aspirations to improve their condition and situation. In particular, when Pearl discloses her ambitions to her mother, Ruth immediately associates Pearl's delusions to her intrinsic evil nature, making a point of the fact that there is something monstrous in her daughter. The demonizing portrayal of the heroine paves the way for identifying instances of postfeminist gothic in West's film as disrupting the tradition of the female gothic.

##### 5. CONTRAVENING GENDER DICTATES THROUGH POSTFEMINIST GOTHIC

In contrast with postfeminist gothic narratives that emphasize the heroine's inability to escape from established gender structures, alternatively, a different stance of postfeminist gothic involves disrupting the tradition of the female gothic and the perpetuation of its gender discourses. As Brabon and Genz argue, the postfeminist gothic heroine attains a sexually assertive persona which wrestles power away from patriarchy and also calls into question static ideas of female propriety and conduct. As postfeminist gothic narratives which defend this approach, they reject instances of female victimhood as well as models of femininity that extol women's subjugated status. Likewise, as a result of the influence of poststructuralism, in comparison with the tradition of the female

gothic, the postfeminist gothic embraces gender skepticism, thus disrupting constructed assignments on the basis of gender discourses, and portraying heroines as masculine and heroes as emasculated. West's film also displays instances of this approach to postfeminist gothic, insofar as Pearl is portrayed as sexually active, she refuses to consider herself as a victim, and she is able to defy cultural assignments of gender. Above all, West's film contributes to updating the postfeminist gothic by turning the gothic heroine into a psychopathic female protagonist that blurs the boundaries separating victim from victimizer, thus swapping roles between heroine and villainess. Accordingly, as Brabon claims, the female protagonist in postfeminist gothic narratives "adopts a subject position that embraces the abusive power of patriarchy, reveling in the violence exacted upon her" (59). As a gothic heroine with psychopathic tendencies, Pearl takes revenge for having been subjected to patriarchal conceptualizations of femininity, and in so doing, she often resorts to phallic tools like pitchforks and axes which figuratively underline her androgynous quality during her violent outbursts.

Taking into consideration that Howard was obliged to move away from Pearl shortly after their marriage, it is assumed that she has already been initiated into sexuality. In her husband's absence, it is thus presumed that Pearl must conform to chastity until Howard returns home. Nonetheless, as Pearl increasingly indulges in her fantasies to become an actress and loses touch with her surrounding bleak reality, she adopts a more active sexual life. In one of her journeys to the village, Pearl stops by a cornfield and fantasizes about a scarecrow, with whom she dances and pretends to have intercourse, as she masturbates over him on the cornfield. This scene precedes Pearl's encounter with the projectionist, with whom she has a relationship as a result of her ambition to become an actress. Besides, in the family home, Pearl has a bath in the same room where his father is sitting in his wheelchair, and even teases him sprinkling him water naughtily. Pearl's sexually active life categorizes her as a heroine in the postfeminist gothic, thus leaving behind idealized values of virginity and chastity that often characterized the heroine in the female gothic.



Despite her oppressive situation, Pearl does not allow herself to be let down, and finds hope in her ambitions to pursue a career of her own as an actress far away from her hometown. Even if her fantasies to take part in a musical detach her further from reality, they also help her cope with her everyday reality in her family home. Accordingly, Pearl refuses to consider herself a victim of her circumstances in need to be rescued from her tyrannical mother. Even though it involves defying her mother authority, Pearl takes action and struggles so that her dream of becoming a cinema star finally comes true. Pearl resorts to her friend, the projectionist, to spur on her fantasies, and also to her sister-in-law, Mitsy, who informs her of an audition to select dancers for a musical. Likewise, when her plans come to no avail, as happens when she realizes the projectionist was only trying to seduce her or when Mitsy auditions for the role and is finally chosen, Pearl rejects to fall into victimhood, and instead, she opts for taking revenge, hence moving from victim to victimizer, as Pearl gets rid of those of have hurt her.

As the heroine in a postfeminist gothic narrative, Pearl also disrupts established gender discourses of femininity and masculinity, thus rather reinforcing gender skepticism. Insofar as Pearl must take responsibility to run the farm on her own, she adopts some conventionally-alleged masculine attitudes for a woman in the first quarter of the twentieth century, such as wearing overalls, working the land, and riding a bicycle to cover a long distance and get to town. Moreover, Pearl gives evidence of despising traditional models of femininity personified by her mother as a model of female chastity and her sister-in-law as a paradigm of female beauty. In contrast with her mother, Pearl is sexually inhibited and has intercourse with other men in spite of being married. Similarly, as opposed to her sister-in-law Mitsy, who physically matches the paradigm of an all-American girl, Pearl is dark-haired, slim, and even rough in her manners. Moreover, given her rebellious nature, Pearl takes control over the men surrounding her to the extent of defying their authority. In spite of his role as the family patriarch, Pearl's father is in

need of Pearl's constant care, thus suggesting that his life is literally in her hands. Even if the projectionist intends to patronize Pearl and exert control over her, it is Pearl who finally takes revenge for having borne his contempt. Moreover, Pearl even fantasizes about Howard's death in the battlefield so that he is punished for abandoning her shortly after their marriage to manage the farm and her family on her own.

As an exponent of postfeminist gothic, West's film endows its gothic heroine with psychopathic tendencies that finally transform her into a serial killer. Although Pearl is in charge of feeding the livestock in the farm, rather than petting on domestic animals, she is particularly fond of Theda, an alligator that lives in the swamp and that she adopts as her pet. Pearl's fondness for Theda underscores her latent fierce and vicious nature, particularly when she kills a goose with a pitchfork and drops it in the swamp to feed the alligator. Pearl increasingly acquires a more violent demeanor, even with her own parents. When Pearl asks her mother for permission to attend an audition and she not only refuses her request, but also slaps her daughter for her daring behavior, Pearl slaps her back and even tells her that she hates her before pushing her mother into the fireplace. Likewise, when Mitsy drops by for a visit, Pearl confesses that she feels there is something wrong with her and that she has an evil side that no one else seems to share, before Pearl confronts Mitsy and assaults her for having destroyed her dreams of becoming a star. Finally, from her psychopathic perspective, Pearl subverts the traditional picture of family life by welcoming her husband Howard in the living room, around the table, surrounded by her late parents and a rotting dinner, while she forces herself to fake a smile as tears are dropping down her cheeks. The twilight characterization of Pearl in the last frame of the film underpins her ambivalent personality for the most part, as she simultaneously embodies the figures of the heroine and the villainess in postfeminist gothic.

## 6. COMING TO TERMS WITH AMBIVALENCE: THE POSTFEMINIST GOTHIC HEROINE

The portrayal of the heroine in postfeminist gothic narratives paves the way for innovative subject positions, as it moves beyond binary distinctions between victim and perpetrator, while it remains haunted by the gender system that it aims to transgress. In this respect, postfeminist gothic narratives provide backlash and progressive developments, as they remain rooted in the tradition of the female gothic, but they are also influenced by the precepts of postfeminism. In exponents of the postfeminist gothic, the heroine is compliant with the expectations of the male gaze, but she is also eager to subvert them.

Likewise, as Hoeveler notes, the postfeminist gothic heroine usually engages in the recurrent dynamics between passivity and aggressiveness, continuously swapping roles between expecting chastisement and inflicting pain. Besides, given the postmodern philosophies from which postfeminism also arises, postfeminist gothic narratives also adopt a significant metafictional approach which draws attention to their own artificiality. The portrayal of Pearl in West's film mostly complies with the ambivalence that usually characterizes the postfeminist gothic heroine. Judging her from her looks, Pearl conforms to the requirements of the male gaze and seems fond of attracting it, as she aspires to turn into a cinema actress, although she also dares defy the male gaze when she leaves behind her oversexed femininity to adopt androgynous and even unsexed ways that detach her from conventional gender prescriptions. Analogously, Pearl also shifts from passivity to aggressiveness, as she plays her role as a meek and submissive young woman, but as a result of her violent outbursts, she leaves behind her compliant ways to release her aggressive instincts. Finally, given her fondness for performing and spending her time absorbed in daydreaming, Pearl is caught between melodrama and parody in scenes in which Pearl overreacts, thus blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, and drawing attention to displays of metafiction in the film, like Pearl's last close up in which she stares directly at the camera.



Throughout the film, as Pearl wishes to fulfil her dream of becoming a cinema actress, she is fond of going to the cinema and watch films, but also of dressing up in her locked room and pretend that she is playing roles as an actress. Accordingly, Pearl swaps from being a spectator in the cinema to picturing herself on the screen as an actress, thus transforming from subject of the gaze into object of the gaze as well as from object of the gaze to subject of the gaze. However, the projectionist, who remains nameless all through the film, becomes an embodiment of the anonymous male gaze, as he is the subject of the gaze over the actress on the screen as well as over Pearl herself, whom he wishes to turn

exclusively into the object of the gaze. Nonetheless, as Pearl rehearses her chosen roles in the intimacy of her room in front of her mirror, she blurs her part as both subject and object of the gaze, thus engaging in performance for her own sake, and rejecting the role that she has been assigned as object of the gaze on behalf of the projectionist.

In the film, Pearl also embraces the dynamics between a gothic heroine and a postfeminist psychokiller, thus moving abruptly from neurotic to psychopathic displays. In a scene, Pearl is sitting at the table with her parents, having dinner after a hard day's work, and she timidly asks her mother for permission to attend an audition the following day. When her mother refuses her permission, Pearl's submissive ways give way to her latent enraged self, which ends in violent confrontation with her mother. Analogously, when Pearl realizes that the projectionist is getting tired of her and plans to desert her, Pearl's acquiescent demeanor changes in favor of her violent outbursts. Likewise, when Mitsy visits her after the audition, Pearl feels the need to confess all her misdeeds, but when Mitsy lets her know that she has been chosen to go on tour with the company, Pearl becomes furious and, once more, she discharges her violence over her sister-in-law.



As a postfeminist gothic heroine, Pearl participates in scenes which draw attention to their own artificiality, thus complying with postmodern tenets which aim to expose fictional codes. When Pearl is sitting among the audience in the cinema, she feels part of the film she is watching, thus blurring fact and fiction. When she takes part in the audition, reality and fantasy blend and Pearl seems to be living in one of her daydreams. Likewise, cinematic techniques such as frozen shots, black and white frames, and the disruption of the fourth-wall effect also contribute to underscoring the cinematic codes, but also to achieving melodramatic as well as parodic effects. Besides, graphic displays of violence in the film sometimes—when Pearl slays the projectionist and her sister-in-law as cases in point—acquire such overstated proportions that also trigger parody and reinforce affectedness. In her ambivalence, Pearl arises as a postfeminist gothic heroine, thus

blending features from the female gothic heroine and the feminist psychokiller, but also displaying self-reflexivity and metafiction, particularly in her role as an aspiring actress.

#### 7. INTERTEXTUALITIES: PORTRAYING THE HEROINE THROUGH METAFICTION AND SELF-REFLEXIVITY

West's *Pearl* possesses a visual style that is evocative of the musicals of Hollywood's golden era, while some of its scenes also bring to mind passages from classic fairy tales. The pervasive sense of intertextuality with other texts reinforces the purpose of underlining metafiction and self-reflexivity as basic components in the film narrative, while it also underscores the textual tradition from which the film derives. The colorful visual style, the coming-of-age component and the female protagonist's fondness for musicals establish pervasive intertextual connections with Victor Fleming's film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Besides, some scenes in the film evoke classic fairy tales like Charles Perrault's "Cinderella" (1697) and "Little Red Riding Hood" (1697)—both of them adapted by the Brothers Grimm in the nineteenth-century—but also Hans Christian Andersen's "The Red Shoes" (1845). Finally, according to Ann Williams, female gothic narratives often correspond with readaptations of the Greek myth of Psyche and Eros, in which Psyche is condemned to lie with an allegedly monstrous creature in the dark only to realize that he is Eros.

In one of the scenes in the film, as Pearl goes back home, she stops by a cornfield where a scarecrow catches her attention and leads her to fantasize about turning him into her dance partner and subsequently into her lover. This scene pays homage to Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz*, particularly in relation to the passage in which Dorothy meets the scarecrow, who will accompany her toward Emerald City to visit the wizard with the hope that he will grant her and her fellows all their wishes. Nonetheless, in West's film, Pearl enacts an erotic encounter with the scarecrow, thus readapting the original scene in Fleming's film and transforming it into a narrative pertaining to the postfeminist gothic.

Besides, as a coming-of-age cinematic narrative, West's film also comprises several scenes that are evocative of some classic fairy tales. As a case in point, upon meeting the projectionist, Pearl escapes from home at night to meet him in the cinema and give free vent to her fantasies to become a film star. As Pearl dresses up and puts some make up, she emulates the fairy tale character of Cinderella, since Pearl is also subjected to the figure of a wicked stepmother and her fantasy will only last until

midnight. Nonetheless, in contrast, Pearl is deprived of a fairy who will help her fulfil her dreams. In addition, several scenes in West's film bring to mind the fairy tale character of Little Red Riding Hood, as Pearl is also dressed in red and must go through the forest to move from her family farm to the village in the company of a wolfish projectionist. However, given her proneness to violence, Pearl shifts roles from Little Red Riding Hood to the lumberjack, as Pearl wields an axe to attack Mitsy. Finally, as a result of Pearl's fondness for dancing, some scenes are also highly suggestive of the character of Karen in Andersen's tale "The Red Shoes," in which Karen's shoes take control as a result of her wickedness and compel her to dance eternally as a result of a curse. In the scene in which Pearl auditions for a role, her painful and compulsive efforts to dance are evocative of Karen's compulsion to move her feet on account of her dancing shoes. Conversely, when Pearl is rejected for the role, it is inferred that her punishment involves having to stop dancing.



Finally, insofar as West's film *Pearl* is rooted in the female gothic tradition, it is also grounded in the classical myth of Psyche and Eros, in which Psyche believes her husband to be a monster, even though she subsequently discovers that he is the god of love. This ambivalence attached to a male character finds reflection in the projectionist and Howard in West's film. In relation to the projectionist, Pearl meets him in the cinema, where images are projected in the dark, in analogy with the way that Psyche usually encounters Eros in the dark. As Psyche feels in relation to Eros in the myth, Pearl is also suspicious about the projectionist's identity and actual intentions. Nonetheless, in a reversal of the classical myth, as the projectionist eventually discovers, it is Pearl who reveals herself to be a monster, insofar as, behind her apparently timid and submissive demeanour, she conceals a dangerous and psychotic personality. As regards Howard, although he is absent and Pearl is unable to lay eyes on him for some time, as happens in the myth when Eros runs away from Psyche, Howard eventually returns home to rejoin Pearl, as Eros

eventually encounters Psyche. Nonetheless, in a reversal of the myth, Pearl differs from Psyche, since Howard finds out about her crimes upon going back home.

## 8. CONCLUSION

An analysis of the second film in West's horror trilogy, *Pearl*, categorizes this cinematic narrative as a contemporary exponent of the female gothic, which revisits and transforms the basic tenets of the tradition of the female gothic and bridges the gap to incorporate features pertaining to the postfeminist gothic. By means of the portrayal of Pearl as a heroine, West's film provides a hybrid depiction which reinforces the cultural discourses of gender in the female gothic, but also their prevalence and disruption in postfeminist gothic narratives. Likewise, the cinematic techniques utilized in the film, which brings attention to metafiction and self-reflexivity, underline a latent purpose to evoke as well as subvert genre conventions in the gothic. Finally, given the relevance attached to gender discourses in both the female gothic and the postfeminist gothic, West's film contributes to juxtaposing the characterization of the heroine pertaining to different traditions and periods in order to highlight them, but also relativize them. West's film *Pearl* thus arises as a contemporary cinematic exponent portraying girlhood and the process coming of age rooted in the tradition of the female gothic and reaching the postfeminist gothic in the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

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