

UNPAYABLE MOTHERHOOD: GOTHIC SACRIFICE, BODILY DEBT AND GENDERED DISPOSABILITY IN *CROSSROADS*¹

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses Laurel Hightower's *Crossroads* as a contemporary North American horror novella in which maternal grief is Gothicised into a debt, ritual payment and bodily sacrifice. Through a close reading of selected excerpts, coded according to the categories of Maternal Debt, Corporeal Payment, Gothic Transaction and Uncertain Presence, the study examines how Chris's mourning for her dead son Trey becomes organised around ritualised bodily surrender in response to the patriarchal, unlimited abnegation of motherhood. The four analytical categories were developed following Saldaña's approach to the qualitative coding. The roadside cross, initially a memorial site, is progressively transformed into a threshold where blood, wounds and fragmented flesh function as offerings for an uncertain ghostly return. Gothic feminist criticism and theories of patriarchal motherhood allow exploring the violence embedded in ideals of maternal selflessness and how maternal selflessness becomes the site where maternal devotion is measured, disciplined and ultimately consumed, revealing motherhood as an impossible and unpayable debt, and the patriarchal conception of the mother as limited and ideal, yet monstrous, simultaneously.

Keywords: Contemporary Gothic; maternal sacrifice; self-disciplining; body horror; liminality; North American narratives.

MATERNIDAD IMPAGABLE: SACRIFICIO GÓTICO, DEUDA CORPORAL Y DESECHABILIDAD DE GÉNERO EN *CROSSROADS*

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza *Crossroads*, de Laurel Hightower, como una novela corta de horror norteamericano contemporáneo en la que el duelo materno se goticiza como deuda, pago ritual y sacrificio corporal. A través de una lectura atenta de fragmentos seleccionados, codificados según las categorías de Deuda Materna, Pago Corporal, Transacción Gótica y Presencia Incierta, el estudio examina cómo el duelo de Chris por su hijo muerto, Trey, se organiza en torno a una entrega corporal ritualizada como respuesta a la abnegación patriarcal e ilimitada de la maternidad. Las cuatro categorías analíticas se desarrollaron siguiendo el enfoque de Saldaña sobre la codificación cualitativa. La cruz junto a la

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carretera, que inicialmente constituye un lugar para el recuerdo del fallecido, se transforma progresivamente en un umbral donde la sangre, las heridas y la fragmentación del cuerpo funcionan como ofrendas para un retorno fantasmal incierto. La crítica gótica feminista y las teorías sobre la maternidad patriarcal permiten explorar cómo la violencia intrínseca a los ideales de abnegación materna convierte el cuerpo en el lugar donde la devoción materna se mide, se disciplina y finalmente se consume, caracterizando la maternidad como una deuda imposible e impagable. La concepción patriarcal de la maternidad como una forma de servicio incondicional se contrapone a las limitaciones reales del cuerpo, que presentan paradójicamente la abnegación materna masculinista de forma ambivalente: como un ideal que debe cumplirse y como una figura monstruosa y abyecta que se autodestruye para que su hijo pueda regresar.

Palabras clave: Gótico contemporáneo; sacrificio materno; auto-disciplinamiento; horror corporal; liminalidad; narrativas Norteamericanas.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary North American horror has consistently presented motherhood as a privileged site for exploring grief, vulnerability, bodily fear and the social demands attached to care (Forttes Zalaquett 287). In this context, Laurel Hightower's conceptualisation of maternal loss in *Crossroads* is not limited to the representation of bereavement. The novella centres on Chris, a mother whose son Trey has died in a car accident and whose visits to the roadside cross marking the place of his death converge, gradually, with blood offerings, bodily harm and an after-death contact that demands sacrifice for the ghostly return to materialise. As the novella progresses, the narrative structures of grief and horror progressively transform into a Gothic form of maternal debt. In the narrative, Chris's mourning of her son proves insufficient, and maternal love is recoded as bodily sacrifice.

Recent literature on the matter allows analysing the intersectional spaces where horror, motherhood and reproductive embodiment converge. Harrington (3) places pregnancy, birth, motherhood and reproductive embodiment at the centre of horror. Aldana Reyes demonstrates that contemporary horror often makes corporeal transgression central to its Gothic effects. Wester and Aldana Reyes frame the twenty-first-century Gothic as a transnational and transmedial field (Wester and Aldana Reyes 5) in which older Gothic forms are contemporised to adapt to new global, technological and socio-political anxieties (Wester and Aldana Reyes 13).

Recent works in Hispanic horror studies also confirm the productivity of reading motherhood through Gothic conventions. For instance, Forttes Zalaquett (287) shows

how contemporary horror can use maternal figures, care and anxiety to expose patriarchal pressures of legitimised intervention. This scholarship is important for situating *Crossroads* within a tradition of maternal and embodied horror. In this study, *Crossroads* is addressed through the reading of maternal grief as a form of bodily payment, where the failure of maternity to protect the offspring of the family unit becomes an eternal debt bound to the subjectivity of the maternal self.

In this regard, Gothic studies help explain the displacement of cultural fears onto bodies, liminal spaces, thresholds and unstable ghostly presences. Botting is useful for this reading because he understands the Gothic as a mode structured by excess and transgression. The Gothic brings back what social, moral and rational orders attempt to exclude, whether in the form of irrational desire, bodily disturbance, forbidden knowledge or unstable presences, as textual expression of repressed fears (Punter and Byron, xviii). Spooner (25), in turn, shows that contemporary Gothic is not restricted to inherited settings such as castles, ruins or ancestral houses but adapts its aesthetics to modern cultural forms and everyday spaces. This is especially relevant to *Crossroads*, where the Gothic does not emerge through a traditional haunted building but through a roadside memorial, grave-like earth, bodily injury and the uncertain return of the dead son.

Additionally, Williams and Hoeveler have analysed how Gothic narratives expose the ideological pressures traditionally placed on femininity and the female body. Wallace and Smith update this framework by treating the Female Gothic as a broad and fluid category (Wallace and Smith 11) rather than a fixed plot of the imprisoned and pursued heroine (Wallace and Smith 3), opening it to more diffuse forms of gendered fear, bodily vulnerability and internalised constraint. In the specific case of *Crossroads*, the feminine figure of Chris is not presented as the slave of the domestic structures of the patriarchy, under an oppressive domestic space. Instead, violence occurs within the feminine subjectivity, where the pressure of unconditional maternal devotion transcends the limits of the body and results in the sacrifice of the mother's body. Rich's (43) contribution to the reading of motherhood as a patriarchal institution allows framing Chris's grief as an inherited cultural script where the mother dissolves in favour of her offspring through unlimited sacrifice. Rich's distinction between the lived experience of mothering and motherhood as a patriarchal institution that regulates that practice (13) is essential to understand the effects of the establishment's pressures on the transformation of care into a distressing maternal obligation. Chris's mothering is inextricable from suffering

because it has been institutionally intervened for her to assume pain and self-denial of motherhood, while fulfilling the reproductive duty the system prescribes for women. Hays' concept of intensive mothering exposes the imposition of maternal organisation of routines, energy and selfhood as a moral pressure of the patriarchy on femininities. As defined by Hays, intensive mothering is a model in which mothers are primarily responsible for childcare and are expected to adopt methods that are "child-centered, [...] emotionally absorbing and labor-intensive" (64). Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* contributes to the interpretation of Chris's grief as an affective force that organises her life around her desire to meet her late son and makes her body available to surrender beyond the instinct of self-preservation. Although Ahmed does not examine grief as a discrete emotion, her theorisation of pain and affective attachment helps explain how Chris experiences grief through her body and how this directs her actions towards Trey. As indicated by Ahmed, "what moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place" (11). Additionally, Ahmed explains that pain involves "the reorientation of the bodily relation to that which gets attributed as the cause of pain" (24). In Chris's case, this movement is reversed, as Trey's absence is both the source of suffering and the object of her attachment to grief, and she resorts to bodily harm as a possible means of recovering contact with her late son.

Feminist theories of bodily disciplining, such as Bartky's approach to the modernisation of patriarchal power as a form of non-overt coercion that is present "everywhere and nowhere" (72) help explain Chris's self-surveillance and self-regulation, which Bartky identifies as forms of obedience to the patriarchy (78). The naturalisation of self-censorship on the feminine body and subjectivity, as catalysed by the pressure of socio-political expectations, would replace former explicit forms of violence, which externally restricted agency on the body and the right to self-determination and autonomy. Bordo's (21) conception of the female body as a cultural surface clarifies how bodily practices can materialise social expectations and helps in reading Chris's body as a socio-political arena where maternity is inextricable from obligation. In *Crossroads*, such an obligation does not extinguish even after the decease of the offspring, extending beyond the spaces of life and death and creating a liminal space of sacrifice-mediated communication. The forms of internalised violence, as observed in the sacrificing of the feminine body, can be explored through Creed's approach to the monstrous-feminine and Kristeva's theory of abjection, which clarify the

framing of the wounded and fragmented feminine body as a site of horror where maternal love implies injury and suffering. Blood, wounds and mutilation function as forms of payment within the narrative, where maternity is associated with an eternal debt.

Thus, this study explores maternal grief in *Crossroads* as a Gothicised structure irreparable of maternal debt that demands more than the mother can give. In this Gothic structure of maternal debt, the absolute surrender of the feminine self is not enough. This article is guided by three research questions. First, the study explores how *Crossroads* transforms maternal mourning into a Gothic construction of debt and obligation. Second, it studies the use of the roadside cross and the surrounding landscape to turn grief into a ritualised detrimental exchange. Third, Chris's wounds and bodily fragmentation are analysed as material evidence of maternal devotion. These research questions analyse the violence within the cultural construction of the mother as a sacrificial entity orientated towards the unconditional service to the family unit, even if life is demanded as a votive offering.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study performs a close reading of *Crossroads* (Hightower) to analyse the construction of motherhood as a structure of debt, payment and bodily sacrifice through language, imagery, narrative progression and Gothic motifs.

The analytical categories adopted for the close reading of *Crossroads* are based on the theoretical framework of motherhood as an ideological institution of unconditional service (Rich 43), the female body as a site where horror materialises through abjection, monstrosity and corporeal transgression (Kristeva; Creed), and the spectral return as an unstable Gothic presence that destabilises the limits between life and death, absence and presence, and reality and desire (Punter and Byron 55).

2.2. DELIMITATION OF THE SAMPLE

The preliminary corpus of this study is *Crossroads*. After the preliminary scanning of the novel for recurrent motifs, like payment, offering, blood, bodily loss, and uncertain contact with Chris's late son, Trey, a series of excerpts were selected for the microtextual analysis of the narrative development of maternal debt across the novella.

The selection of the microtextual sample was guided by the presence of at least two of these representations: motherhood as debt or obligation, the use of bodily deterioration as expression of the maternal grief, or the uncertainty of Trey's ghostly presence. Climactic narrative centrality was adopted as a criterion for the prioritisation of specific textual excerpts.

2.3. EXCERPT CODING

Following Saldaña's approach to qualitative coding as a way of organising and interpreting textual meaning, four categories were established for analysis, namely Maternal Debt (MD), Corporeal Payment (CP), Gothic Transaction (GT) and Uncertain Presence (UP).

As for the delimitation criteria of the coding categories, an excerpt was coded as "Maternal Debt" when it represented motherhood, grief or care as an obligation that cannot be fully satisfied. This category includes passages in which Chris's relation to Trey is shaped by guilt, posthumous maternal responsibility or self-blame. "Corporeal Payment" was assigned to excerpts where the body expresses grief, debt or desire. This includes references to blood, wounds or sacrifice when presented as a toll for contacting Trey. "Gothic Transaction" was used for passages in which supernatural contact is conceptualised as a ritual exchange for the ghostly return. Finally, "Uncertain Presence" was applied to excerpts where the presence of the ghost is ambiguous through apparitions, sensations or voices.

Additionally, a code has been devised to identify the textual excerpts of the analytical corpus, where E# identifies the excerpt number, in the order of appearance in the novella. Subsequently, the primary motif category is identified through one or more major categories from those previously established in the Methodology section, namely MD (Maternal Debt), CP (Corporeal Payment) or GT (Gothic Transaction). Finally, the number of the chapter will be referred to through C#. The chapter marker is included only for textual traceability, as the e-book version of *Crossroads* does not allow page-based referencing.

By way of example, E01-CP/GT-C01 refers to Corpus excerpt 1, in Chapter 1, where Corporeal Payment and Gothic Transactions are the main analytical motifs.

The complete list of excerpts, codes and motif-based analytical functions can be consulted in Appendix A.

2.4. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single primary text and, consequently, limits the extrapolation of the outcomes of the analysis performed to the general conceptualisation of patriarchal motherhood in contemporary North American horror. Its conclusions are specific to *Crossroads*, although they may suggest productive future lines of comparative research on maternal sacrifice, grief horror and the Gothic approach to the female body.

Likewise, in this article, the Gothic is approached as a functional mode and not as a systematic genre itself, where the narrative mechanisms for the organisation of the space, the female body, the threshold between life and death, and grief and desire transform maternal mourning into Gothic motifs of sacrifice, exchange and uncertain return.

3. ANALYSIS

3.1. THE ROADSIDE CROSS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF MOURNING

In *Crossroads*, the movement from mourning to sacrifice begins before Chris understands that the process is already occurring, being presented as a mere accident. The process is encoded in Excerpt E01-CP/GT-C01 (Appendix A): “The first time Chris buried a part of her by her son’s roadside cross, it was an accident.” This excerpt establishes the leitmotif that will govern the rest of the narrative by correlating the mother’s body, the roadside cross, and the language of burial. Additionally, the assertion reveals that, before Chris assumes sacrifice as a practice, the narration has already predisposed her to ritual pain in the ground beside Trey’s memorial.

The Gothic connection between the body and the funerary place becomes explicit when “the ground drew her blood deep” (E02-CP/GT-C01). In this excerpt, the earth is not described as a neutral surface. Instead, it actively receives, absorbs, and almost appears to pull the blood into itself within a sort of vampiric autonomy. Thus, the familiar roadside memorial is reframed as a threshold where ordinary mourning is disrupted by bodily contact, the absorption of the abject fluids, and the possibility of a response from the earth that reacts to Chris’s undesired blood shedding. In line with Botting’s (5) approach to Gothic transgression, the scene can be read as a form of transgression, where antithetical realities of the living body and the memorial cross, evoking death, meet. According to Punter and Byron’s (55) views on the Gothic as “a logic of the phantom,”

when Chris visits the place where Trey died and shares, unwillingly, her blood with the funeral site, her body becomes part of the place, unsettling the limits between life and death.

The marginality of the memorial cross strengthens the connection between Chris and the place where she honours her deceased son. As indicated in Excerpt E03-GT/UP/C01, the place “wasn’t his grave, not really. He was buried at Elmwood, near Chris’s father.” Instead, the memorial cross marks the liminal space where the abrupt and accidental transition of Trey into death occurred. The liminality of the memorial cross also indicates where Trey’s youth, family lineage and existence were interrupted. The official grave is a site of public and institutional recognition and mourning. Butler links bodily existence to mortality and exposure to violence (*Precarious* 26) and argues that forms of public commemoration distribute grievability (34). In contrast to the institutional grave, the roadside cross is affectively significant for Chris because it marks the precise site where Trey’s bodily vulnerability culminated in death and where her grief remains attached. The insistent return of the mourning mother to the roadside cross fosters the identification of the feminine protagonist to her patriarchal institutional motherhood. From Butler’s (*Gender* 43-44) concept of performativity, patriarchal gender is constructed, reinforced and naturalised through iterative performance. In the specific case of Chris, the grieving mother strengthens her bond with her late son, not only by returning to the roadside cross, but also by surrendering her body to the earth in the area. The performative commitment of Chris with her patriarchal motherhood is confirmed in Excerpt E04-UP/MD-C01, “She never turned around when she visited Trey—it would kill the illusion,” where the fragile stability of the uncertain ghostly presence of Trey is coercively conditioned to the satisfaction of the patriarchal expectations of maternal abnegation and sacrifice. The expression “kill the illusion” encodes Chris’s refusal to question the principles that govern her learnt approach to reality. Chris’s consent to maternal abnegation and to pay the bodily toll it implies is an imposition for her to continue occupying the identity of mother in relation to a dead son. The problem is not only that Chris misses Trey. Her motherhood has no clear object after Trey’s death, and the roadside cross works as the liminal space where that relation can be maintained. The preservation of this maternal relation functions as a Gothic critique of institutional motherhood, where the cross sustains Chris’s maternal identity by turning care into self-destructive sacrifice and in which the institutional demands of motherhood continue even

after the death of the son's death. Chris's relationship with the ghostly presence of Trey does not merely rely on an affective bond, as it demands her participation in a cruelty pedagogy dynamic of self-disciplining that will be later addressed in this study.

The reading of the memorial cross as a contemporary Gothic space of unresolved affect is clarified by Spooner (25). Far from the traditional association of The Gothic with a castle, a mansion or an ancestral curse that confronts characters with a fateful destiny, the Gothic is situated in an everyday memorial cross, where uncertainty and desire reside. Symbolically, the cross is multidimensional: its material form is publicly visible from the roadside, but its affective meaning can only be accessed by Chris. Following Ahmed's (7) views of emotions as orientations towards objects, Chris's grief is read as attached to the roadside cross, which turns into the place where she can still feel close to Trey. In excerpt E05-UP-C02, Trey is described as appearing "standing there. In the pool of castoff light from the streetlamp," in the liminality between perception and the uncertainty of incompleteness, leading to an unstable ghostly return. For Chris, Trey was formerly a protected illusion, protected from rational testing for the fear of its dissolution. At this point, the apparition gains relative agency and autonomy within the perceptive unpredictability of the cast-off light shadows. Within Chris's mind, the effaced ghostly return of the dead son is correlated with an accidental drop of blood that is reinterpreted as a ritual sacrifice for Trey to appear. Chris recalls "the way her blood had seeped into the dried ground" (E06-CP/GT-C03), and that memory allows her to imagine that the blood may have mattered. As asserted by Chris, "this wasn't about decoration; it was about an offering" (E07-MD/GT-C03). Memorialisation becomes a ceremony of after-death contact: Trey's roadside cross turns into a threshold where Chris's wound reopens and her bloody sacrificial payment is absorbed by the grave-like earth.

Thus, the roadside cross does not simply represent Trey's death. It recodes mourning as a debt for a formerly inefficient maternity that imposes a price. Chris's maternal attachment is drawn into a structure where love must be shown through surrender, and maternal mourning works as an eternal debt. Specifically, Chris wonders whether what is required is "something that represented a true sacrifice" (E08-MD/GT-C04). The phrase "true sacrifice" is significant because it separates ordinary remembrance from meaningful loss. This formulation implies that not every gesture counts; decoration, visitation and grief are not enough unless they are accompanied by the surrender of the

self. Chris desires Trey's return and understands that she must pay in order to deserve access to him and continue to be a mother.

Thus, the sacrificial dynamic of maternal debt grows increasingly explicit. Chris believes that "Trey hadn't returned because of an arbitrary calendar flip, but because of a blood sacrifice. Hers" (E11-CP/MD-C07). This excerpt is one of the clearest articulations of the narrative's progression from mourning to bodily payment. Trey's possible return is no longer connected to anniversary, memory or the emotional force of grief. It is connected to blood. The final word, "Hers," is crucial because it identifies the mother's body as the relevant source of value. The sacrifice must be hers because the maternal body is the body that is expected to pay.

Hays (64) describes a cultural model in which the mother is expected to organise her time, energy, emotions and identity around her offspring. *Crossroads* pushes that model into horror by literalising its sacrificial demands. Chris does not only give time, attention or emotional labour in the most patriarchally strict and literal sense. Instead, she gives blood as the ultimate sign of maternal abnegation. The text therefore exposes and partially subverts the violence hidden within a familiar ideal. The patriarchal conception that mothers' lives must be orientated towards absolute care and service to the family structure is deformed into a narrative and ideological source of horror, by revealing the bodily violence concealed within the apparently conventional statement "Parenting came with sacrifice, though" (E14-MD-C09). Once sacrifice is established as the condition for after-death contact, the payment becomes growingly insufficient, as encoded in Chris's assertion that "Whatever you're giving up has to be worth more to be effective" (E12-MD/CP-C08). This explains the significance of the excerpt "Wondering how much of her it would take" (E13-MD/CP-C08), where the body becomes available for unconditional absorption.

The ideological centre of this process appears in the phrase "She believed in smiling sacrifice" (E15-MD-C11). This formulation adds another layer to the problem. Chris does not merely believe that mothers sacrifice; she believes that sacrifice should be borne quietly, even pleasantly. From a patriarchal perspective, a mother is considered to constitute an ideal model of maternity when she is available for abnegated suffering. Bartky's approach to self-regulation (78) as a result of the socio-political pressure of patriarchal expectations is relevant to observe Chris's dynamics of internalised violence, which do not rely on the oppression of the female by an external male force. As encoded

in E16-CP/MD/GT-C12), “Blood wasn’t enough; she would have to bury more of herself out there”, Chris deems her haematic sacrifice as inadequate. At this point, the pedagogy of cruelty (Segato 21) is essential to understand how repeated violence lowers empathy on the female body. In this context, the guilt of feminine victimisation is displaced from the patriarchal expectations on motherhood to the female protagonist, who is pathologised through a self-harming agency. The patriarchal intervention for the disciplining and control of femininity would no longer be necessary or socially accepted in 21st-century North American democracy. As observed in Chris’s self-induced pain, certain models of femininity would have learnt to rectify themselves for the embodiment of the ideal of feminine limitless abnegation.

The roadside cross, initially a place of mourning, now is symbolically framed to demand fragments of the mother’s body. While Chris’s devotion to her son is presented as endless, her body is finite, which further intensifies the sense of feminine insufficiency. As lamented by Chris, “there were only ten of each [fingers and toes], not an unlimited supply” (E17-CP/MD-C12). In line with Bordo’s reading of the female body as a socially shaped and politically inscribed site, Chris’s femininity is socio-politically disappointing even when she fulfils the prescriptions of the patriarchal system (Bordo 21). When Chris aligns with the masculinist requirement of extreme motherhood devotion, her limited body fails to supply enough sacrificial material to satisfy the uncertain presence of her late son. Thus, either by consenting to surrender her life and body or by prioritising her own wellbeing over the establishment’s demands on the mother as an institution, Chris’s motherhood would be disappointing. Institutional motherhood is revealed as an impossible double bind, where continued self-sacrifice can neither restore Trey nor fully satisfy the institutional demands of maternal protection and care. Conversely, Chris’s prioritisation of her own wellbeing would violate the expectation of unlimited maternal abnegation. In either case, her motherhood is conceptualised as inadequate.

Kristeva’s theory of abjection also explains the Gothic treatment of the feminine body in the narrative. Beyond the mere presence of blood and bodily fragmentation, Chris’s feminine body becomes socio-politically useful whenever her body is damaged, as her attempts to reach her dead son progressively bring her own living body closer to the condition of a corpse, which Kristeva describes as “the utmost of abjection” and as “death infecting life” (4). In this context, bodily violation serves as proof of maternal fidelity and compliance with the precepts of unrestricted abnegation of motherhood.

Hence, Chris's body is a pedagogical platform where female suffering is legitimised as patriarchally functional. Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine explains how the horror emerges from the maternal body made abject. Thus, Chris becomes monstrous not through aggression, but through the loss of bodily integrity, as produced by the demand for unlimited maternal sacrifice. When Chris legitimises her own bodily disciplining by persuading herself to believe that "She was the mom, and she had to do what was needed, no matter how terrifying" (E18-MD/CP-C14), maternal unconditional devotion is framed as anomalous.

The burial of the amputated finger confirms that bodily injury has become part of the ritual payment for her motherhood to endure. The explicit burial of Chris's "finger at the base of the cross" (E19-CP/GT-C16) is not interpreted as a loss but as a willing offering within a system of gradual concession. The burial of the finger in the same memorial site that first received her blood confirms the mutation of the function of the cross into hope and a private proof of the fulfilment of her patriarchal maternal role.

3.2. UNCERTAIN RETURN AND THE COST OF MATERNAL SACRIFICE

In this narrative, maternal self-induced violence is not solely cruel because of the unlimited damage Chris inflicts on her body for her son's ghost to appear. Instead, there is a sense of cruelty in the uncertainty of the sacrifice-borne ghostly return. As suggested in excerpt E09-GT/UP-C05, Chris believes she is "communicating with something, that someone had heard her calls and was accepting her offerings." The definition of the ghostly presence by means of semantically vague words like "something" and "someone" is crucial, as all Chris is granted for her maternal bodily disciplining is a hopeful and axiomatic faith that it is Trey who receives her maternal offerings.

The lack of definition of the ghostly presence is pivotal for the bodily degradation of the unconditionally abnegated mother. Chris's ritual offerings progressively imply more bodily fragmentation ("She began to draw the blade down her arm, not across," E10-CP/MD-C05) from blood to flesh, because the mourning mother appears to seek the clarification of the unstable apparition. As the demand increases, the lack of certainty is increasingly disturbing to the patriarchal unconditional mother. Chris's question about "how much of her it would take" (E13-MD/CP-C08) defines the debt as potentially unpayable, as the goal for the ghostly presence to stabilise is ever effacing, despite the increasing bodily investment of Chris. Once again, the patriarchally obedient mother is

insufficient, as she fails to make her desires materialise and her material function to operate efficiently.

The perennial instability of presence and the affective necessity of the mourning mother to continue her maternal duty lead Chris to propose an ultimate bodily exchange, as observed in her reflection of the method to use “to snuff out her own life and trade it for her son’s” (E20-MD/CP-C18). The use of the word “trade” describes Chris’s offerings as a Gothic transaction where the surrender of life has an uncertain result, despite the magnitude of the sacrifice. This is confirmed in E21-MD/CP-C19, where Chris considers that “even if all she bought with her life was a chance for her son, it was worth it,” subordinating her certain life to the uncertain future of the entity she believes to be her son’s ghost.

The final formulation of this belief appears near the end of the novella: “Her life, her happiness, her immortal soul—all of it was forfeit for him” (E22-MD/CP-C23). The word “forfeit” is analytically relevant, as Chris renounces her future, her happiness and even her spiritual integrity, organising herself entirely around the son. She radicalises Hays’s model of intensive mothering because this child-centred investment of maternal time, emotion and identity persists even when after Trey’s death and culminates in self-destruction (64). The deadly outcome of Chris’s unlimited maternity confirms the ambivalent reading of abnegated motherhood as both a patriarchal demand and a monstrous form of self-destruction. Unconditional motherhood is both an establishment requirement of the patriarchal structure of the family and an inescapable sign of pathology where femininity is coerced into self-destruction.

The asymmetry of the Gothic transaction, where the risk of surrendering the mother’s body and existence is worth the payment, for as long as there is a minimal possibility for Trey’s return, hierarchises the gendered socio-political relevance of lives. In this vertical system, the life of the mother is characterised by its disposability, as opposed to Trey’s grievable life, which is publicly recognised as a life that matters, in line with Butler’s theorisation of the differential distribution of grievability (*Frames* 15).

4. CONCLUSION

Crossroads, by Laurel Hightower, presents maternal grief not simply as emotional devastation but as a Gothic economy of debt. In this dynamic, mourning is transformed into payment, and maternal love converges with bodily loss in an unlimited ritual of

sacrificial exchange. Chris's performative returns to Trey's roadside cross shape her institutional maternity as an iterative exercise of abnegation and life orientation towards her late offspring. The roadside cross operates as the Gothicised memorial site where Chris's desires to contact her late son and the promise of the continuation of her patriarchal maternal duty materialise partially into an uncertain ghostly return that demands more self-discipline. The self-induced disciplining of the mourning mother is framed as an obligation where grief and bodily fragmentation must constantly prove love. Simultaneously, the unlimited maternal duty of the patriarchal mother proves her bodily limitations to respond to the demands of the system.

The conditioning of Chris's contact with the uncertain apparition that is axiomatically believed to be Chris's son to a progressing sacrifice reframes bodily destruction as a gendered transaction of ritual concession. Blood is no longer an accidental sign of injury but a medium of exchange. Later, this exchange intensifies through bodily fragmentation, as Chris comes to believe that the return of her son requires increasingly valuable sacrifices. Her body becomes the material through which love, guilt and maternal responsibility are measured. The same violence that places Chris within the patriarchal standards of an ever-giving mother and confirms the usefulness of the feminine body when it is destroyed in favour of the members of her family unit frames her as an abject monster. In this sense, femininity is a naturally failed project, both when complying with the ideal of abnegation prescribed by the patriarchal establishment and when subversively adopting a dissident agency that refuses to consent.

The previously discussed uncertainty of Trey's ghostly return further intensifies the asymmetrical relationship between the mother and the deceased son. Throughout the ritual destruction of her body, Chris never receives stable confirmation that the entity responding to her offerings is truly her son. However, the possibility is enough to justify the sacrifice of her blood, flesh, happiness, future and life as an endless material debt. Thus, the imbalanced maternal-filial relationship established by the mother's ritual sacrifice produces a patriarchal hierarchy of socio-political value in which the son's grievability is prioritised over the mother's basic right to live; she is rendered disposable by the establishment.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

SERGIO YAGÜE PASAMÓN is a researcher in literary and cultural studies whose work focuses on the narrative construction of patriarchal gender in horror literature and forms of digital horror. Yagüe Pasamón's research examines representations of femininity, the body, monstrosity, sexuality, and violence, paying attention to the ways in which horror narratives reproduce, negotiate, or challenge patriarchal imaginaries. Yagüe Pasamón is also interested in the transformation of these representations across digital environments, including social media storytelling, participatory platforms, online fiction, and emerging audiovisual formats. The approach combines literary theory, gender studies, cultural studies, and digital media analysis. The research activity's aim is to explore how horror functions as a space where gender norms, social anxieties, and structures of power become visible and contestable.

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