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ESTUDIOS

When the Puppet Becomes Human: The Gothic Posthumanism of *In the Lives of Puppets* (2023)*

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Abstract: *In the Lives of Puppets* (2023) reinterprets Carlo Collodi's Pinocchio set in a dystopian future where most of humanity has disappeared. Victor Lawson is a 19-year-old human who lives peacefully with his unconventional family of non-human machines. Their tranquil life in an isolated wood is shattered when Victor finds and repairs an android, Hap, and unintentionally reveals the family's location to the dangerous robots from the City of Electric Dreams.

This paper discusses *In the Lives of Puppets* through the lenses of posthumanism, Affect theory, and Gothic fiction. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti's view that posthuman subjects are relational entities defined by connections with both human and nonhuman agents, the story challenges the traditional boundaries of identity. Affect theory emphasizes the fluidity of relationships and emotions, challenging notions of human superiority and suggesting that emotions can transcend human experience. The novel's connection to Gothic fiction's exploration of societal anxieties further develops this analysis. Through its depiction of fears related to biotechnological advancement, *In the Lives of Puppets* reflects contemporary concerns about identity and agency in a machine-dominated world. Ultimately, the novel offers a profound commentary on what it means to be human in an increasingly posthuman landscape.

Keywords: Posthuman; Posthuman Identity; Posthuman Gothic; Queer Gothic: Pinocchio

ES Cuando la marioneta se vuelve humana: el poshumanismo gótico en In the Lives of Puppets (2023)

Resumen: *In the Lives of Puppets* (2023) reinterpreta el Pinocho de Carlo Collodi ambientado en un futuro distópico donde la mayor parte de la humanidad ha desaparecido. Victor Lawson es un humano de 19 años que vive en paz con su poco convencional familia de máquinas. Su tranquila vida en un bosque aislado se hace añicos cuando Víctor encuentra y repara a un androide, Hap, y sin querer revela la ubicación de la familia a los peligrosos robots de la Ciudad de los Sueños Eléctricos.

Este artículo analiza *In the Lives of Puppets* a través del cristal del poshumanismo, la teoría del afecto y la ficción gótica. Basándose en la visión de Rosi Braidotti de que los sujetos posthumanos son entidades relacionales definidas por conexiones con agentes tanto humanos como no humanos, la historia desafía los límites tradicionales de la identidad. La teoría del afecto enfatiza la fluidez de las relaciones y las emociones, desafiando las nociones de superioridad humana y sugiriendo que las emociones pueden trascender la experiencia humana. La conexión de la novela con la exploración de las ansiedades sociales por parte de la ficción gótica desarrolla aún más este análisis. A través de su descripción de los miedos relacionados con el avance biotecnológico, *In The Lives of Puppets* refleja las preocupaciones contemporáneas sobre la identidad y la agencia en un mundo dominado por las máquinas. En última instancia, la novela ofrece un comentario profundo sobre lo que significa ser humano en un panorama cada vez más posthumano.

Palabras clave: Posthumano; Identidad posthumana; Gótico posthumano; Gótico queer: Pinocho.

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1. Introduction

TJ Klune's *In the Lives of Puppets* (2023) reimagines and reverses Carlo Collodi's timeless tale of *Pinocchio* (1883) in a futuristic, dystopian setting where machines have eradicated humanity. The novel follows Victor Lawson, the last human on Earth, who lives happily with his "puppets," a family entirely made up of machines. The story opens in a fairy-tale style: "In an old and lonely forest, far away from almost everything, sat a curious dwelling" (Klune 1). The narration is set in nature, in a wood where the peculiar family unit lives in the branches of a protective grove, a clear intertextual reference to Johann David Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812)—a reinterpretation of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) (Huszno n.p.). The narrative in *Puppets* revolves around the lives of three robots that are the members of the family—the father, an android scientist named Giovanni Lawson, the "mother figure," Nurse Ratched, "Nurse Registered Automaton to Care, Heal, Educate, and Drill" (Klune 9), a gently malevolent nurse machine[1], and "the brother," Rambo, a nervous vacuum, an imagined future version of the famous Roomba yearning for affection. They live alongside Victor, the only human member. Together, they lead a joyful life, hidden from a society that, after eliminating humans, is formed only by machines.

However, their peace is disrupted when Victor, in a futuristic echo of Victor Frankenstein, discovers and repairs an android named "Hap," short for "Hysterically Angry Puppet," a designation Nurse Ratched and Rambo find more suitable for him. As Hap unintentionally reveals their hidden sanctuary, the family's security is compromised, resulting in Giovanni's apprehension and forced return to the City of Electric Dreams,[2] ruled and inhabited by machines. Victor and the remaining members of his family embark on a journey to rescue Giovanni. Along the way, Victor feels drawn to Hap and grapples with the discovery of love and attachment in a world where trust is scarce.

This article examines how Klune's narrative redefines the Gothic through posthuman affect, asking: how emotional connection, rather than biology, comes to define the human in a machine-dominated world. By rewriting the *Pinocchio* myth in a Gothic, posthuman key, Klune performs the collapse of human and nonhuman boundaries and suggests that affective bonds, rather than biology, constitute the essence of humanity. I argue that Klune's novel reconfigures the Gothic tradition into a "posthuman Gothic," where fear of the machine evolves into compassion or even love for it. By blending Gothic unease with posthuman ethics, the novel imagines a future in which machines inherit not only the world but also the capacity for empathy, loss, and moral choice.

Methodologically, this analysis relies on close reading informed by posthumanist and Affect theory to trace how these ideas operate within Klune's narrative. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti's view that posthuman subjects are relational entities defined by connections with both human and nonhuman agents, the story challenges the traditional boundaries of identity. Affect theory emphasizes the fluidity of relationships and emotions, while Gothic fiction explores societal anxieties by blurring the lines between human and nonhuman, evoking deep emotions and questioning identity. As Jeffrey Weinstock reminds us, the Gothic functions "as the dark reflection of contemporary nonhuman theoretical paradigms" (2023, 27). Read this way, Klune's novel both embraces posthuman ideas of relational identity and highlights the anxieties that accompany attempts to decenter the human. Through its depiction of fears related to biotechnological advancement, *In the Lives of Puppets* reflects contemporary concerns about identity and agency in a machine-dominated world. Ultimately, the novel offers a profound commentary on what it means to be human in an increasingly posthuman landscape.

2. Theoretical Framework: Posthumanism, Affect and the Gothic

Philosopher Rosi Braidotti, a central figure in the development of posthuman thought and one of the founders of the posthuman branch known as "Critical Posthumanism," claims that we are already living in a posthuman era, "our historical condition"(xiv). Her philosophical stance, recently aligned with the feminist materialist approach, defines he posthuman subject as a "relational and Affective entity" ("Preface" xvi) whose identity emerges through connections with human and nonhuman forces. In this view, subjectivity is embodied, embedded, and materially entangled rather than that of the autonomous humanist self. According to Braidotti, the posthuman subject cannot be understood in isolation: it arises from what she calls "zoe-geo-techno entanglements" (xv), a distributed, interdependent form of being that relocates agency across human and nonhuman matter.

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1 The name Nurse Ratched in *The Lives of Puppets* references the infamous antagonist from Ken Kesey's 1962 novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. As Rachel Syme explains, Kesey drew inspiration for Nurse Ratched from a real nurse he encountered while working the night shift in a psychiatric hospital in Oregon. However, he later acknowledged that he had deliberately amplified her cruelty for dramatic purposes, transforming her into a symbol of authoritarian power and calculated psychological manipulation (Syme n.p.).

2 "Electric Dreams" is an intertextual reference to Philip K. Dick's legacy. A prolific writer, he wrote more than 100 short stories. In 2017 Channel 4 launched a TV series based on a selection of short stories written by Dick, and later, in the same year, a book was published with ten of the stories that inspired the series alongside essays written by the series' script writers explaining the changes made. All the stories are full of "classic Dickian themes: psychic connections, absurd consumer technology, and the blurry line between artifice and reality" (Robertson n.p.).

Affect is not an original or pure state but arises in the relationships between the body and the surrounding world. It concerns how the body influences and is influenced by others, by matter, and by experience (Gregg and Seigworth 2). According to Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Affect theory draws on two main traditions: Silvan Tomkins's Psychobiology, which treats emotion as a biological drive shaped by social interactions, and Gilles Deleuze's Spinozan Ethology, which understands affect as a force circulating among bodies, objects, and environments. In both perspectives, Affect describes processes of change, intensity, and interconnection rather than fixed emotional states.

Gregg and Seigworth extend this idea to human, machine, and inorganic assemblages such as cybernetics, neuroscience, AI, and bioengineering, blurring the line between living and nonliving entities and affecting how we understand emotions (6–8). Machines increasingly register and reproduce human emotion, raising questions about whether affect can be genuine when simulated. Affect theory also coincides with the New Materialist understanding of the world as a dynamic, interconnected web of relationships between matter, humans, nonhumans, and forces. This perspective emphasizes that all matter, living and nonliving, has agency and the ability to affect and be affected. Both Posthumanism and Affect Theory therefore reject human exceptionalism and instead stress relationality among humans, technologies, and other forms of life.

Thematically overlapping with these approaches, Gothic fiction portrays situations in which the frontiers between human and nonhuman blur, where strong emotions arise, and where the construction of human identity is contested by uncontrollable forces that call into question what it means to be human. As Weinstock observes, the Gothic is concerned with "what happens when things acquire uncanny animacy … when humans are numbered as things among other things" (2023, 26).

Originating in the 1790s as a reaction against the overreliance of the Enlightenment on human reason, Gothic narratives have always been deeply intertwined with the concerns of their respective eras. These anxieties evolved in response to various societal changes, including political revolutions, industrialization, urbanization, shifts in sexual and domestic roles, and advancements in scientific discovery (Botting 1). Gothic characters have evolved alongside modernity, revealing the darker side of Enlightenment and humanist ideals. The Gothic genre compresses perceived threats to humanist ideals. These include supernatural and natural forces, wild transgressions and delusions, religious sins and human evil, social deviance, mental breakdown, and spiritual decay (Botting 1). The purpose of the Gothic genre was originally to provoke fear, unease, or repulsion, that is, to "Affect" the reader. An affective approach to the genre implies that the Gothic focuses on the impact it has on the reader and the immersive experience it creates. As Xavier Aldana Reyes proposes, the "Affective" approach to Gothic considers not only how a novel or film generates a sense of dread but also how the images on screen or the words on the page can evoke specific physical and emotional responses in the audience. This approach underlines that Gothic Affect is closely related to the human instinct for self-preservation and considers how the incorporation of external threats in the narrative, whether imprecise or clearly embodied, evokes these primal feelings and emotions typically identified as Gothic (17–23). Aldana's method also acknowledges that texts can be Gothic to varying degrees, depending on their perspective, intention, and purpose. This perspective allows for a deeper exploration of Gothic Affect as a psychological process, celebrating the psychological responses involved in the genre's fictional dynamics

The Gothic "speaks to universal, primitive taboos, and foundational elements of what it means to be human" (Luckhurst xiii). Monstrosity "was not a predominant trope of the early Gothic novel until *Frankenstein*, but it is arguably one of its most important markers in the twenty-first century" (Aldana Reyes 7). Besides, twenty-first-century Gothic has incorporated new "fears, which include, but are not limited to, new forms of advanced technology, ecological devastation, the migration of people, the speed of hypercapitalism, and the powerful forces of globalization" (Edwards 72).

Posthuman anxieties and Gothic themes often align, as both explore fears of losing humanity, identity, and control in the face of technological and biological change. In this line, Anya Heise-von der Lippe coined the term "Posthuman Gothic" to refer to a contemporary subgenre of Gothic fiction that expresses worries about biotechnological developments that have opened the possibility of human enhancement and have the capacity "to change our perceptions of what it means to be human" (218). Traditionally, "the Gothic is a mode of cultural production that pertains to the exploration of otherness and uncanny familiarity"(Bloom 8). As Pramod K. Nayar explains, the incapacity to accept the other and to confront difference is the source of horror in the Posthuman Gothic (Nayar 118). However, it is not only fear of the other as an "external threat," but also the "internal dread that the technological other already inhabits the human subject, that the subject is betrayed from within" (Bolton 5), it is the fear of becoming the other, the fear of losing our "stable" human identity.

The convergence of Posthumanism, Affect Theory, and the Gothic provides the conceptual foundation for the present analysis. Together, they open a space to consider how emotional exchange, relational identity, and the dissolution of boundaries function within Klune's narrative world. Building on these frameworks, the following discussion adopts a close reading approach to examine how *In the Lives of Puppets* translates these ideas into narrative form and imagery. Methodologically, this paper applies posthumanist and Affect-theoretical concepts to selected scenes that illustrate the redefinition of emotion, morality, and identity within Klune's text.

3. Rewriting the Myth: Creation and Lonliness

In the Lives of Puppets, rewrites earlier narratives such as *Frankenstein* (1818), *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812), and, in a less subtle way, *Pinocchio* (1883). It combines several modes and genres— fairy tale, dystopia/

utopia, science fiction, and the Gothic. In this close reading of Klune's novel, the analysis applies Braidotti's notion of relational subjectivity and Affect theory's understanding of emotion as a connective force to examine how creation and companionship redefine humanity. This approach demonstrates how the narrative transforms familiar myths of invention and solitude into a posthuman meditation on empathy and moral agency. As one reviewer notes: "readers should be aware that the darkness of the original story remains in this retelling" *("Book Review: In the Lives of Puppets* by T.J. Klune" 2023, n.p.). In *The Lives of Puppets*, melancholy emerges not from direct statement but from allusion: the eradication of humankind and the loss of past societies weigh heavily on the characters' minds (Johnson n.p.).

Klune opens the novel with a darkly "humorous" warning epigraph:

FOR HUMANITY

You kinda suck, but you invented books and music,
So the universe will probably keep you around
for a little bit longer,
You got lucky.

This time. (Klune n.p.)

The epigraph is an ironic critique of humanity's flaws, while acknowledging the qualities that might redeem it. If we have survived, or if we survive a while longer, it is not for our own merits but because we remain the creators of books and music. Within *Puppets'* dystopian setting (at least for humanity that is now extinct), the hints of humor become gloomier and more ironic when foreseeing our inevitable disappearance with detached irony. As in most dystopias and utopias, the line between both cannot be clearly drawn: "The a priori clear distinction between utopia and dystopia... has proved to be problematic: an ideal society does not mean the same for everyone"(Muñoz-González 28). *Puppets* is about the end of humanity—a dystopia for humankind but a possible utopia for its mechanical inheritors, "a first step to a new beginning" (Klune 2).

In the story, Giovanni tells Victor about how they came to be together. Gio explains how he went to live in the woods seeking a new beginning. After years alone, an inexplicable pain appeared in his chest. Calculating its cause, he identified that pain as "loneliness," and shortly after, a couple of humans appeared in what seemed like a flight from some type of danger, "with their eyes wide in fright" (3). The couple entrusted him with a small baby to hide and keep it safe. After taking care of the child for several years, Giovanni felt for the first time love (5) and promised to always be close to Victor: "you and me. Always" (5). However, the tale is false, Victor was never abandoned by human parents; he was fabricated by Gio; his gestation was inside some vats hidden in Gio's bunker, because of his "loneliness" (Klune 159), a feeling of solitude which began after leaving "The City of Electric Dreams" looking for "something more to this life, Bigger. Grander" (158).

Victor was thus artificially born, like Pinocchio. In Collodi's original *Pinocchio*, Geppetto creates the puppet driven by his personal desires rather than by altruistic reasons. He desires a family and connection. Pinocchio, the artificial child, is "a model of a person invented by human beings for their own purposes," who provokes chaos and moral questioning (Lucas 50). Likewise, Gio, a robot, "re-invents" Victor to fill his solitude and to bring happiness (Klune 72). Yet, this act of creation also exposes the cruelty of creating a human destined to be only among machines.

Gio intentionally created Victor to be "affected" by him in a positive way, to make himself happy. In Sara Ahmed's terms, happiness is an orientation toward what affects us. We move toward or away from objects according to how they make us feel (32). Giovanni was "searching for a connection. Making something out of nothing so the spaces between [them] do not seem so far" (Klune 74). This is why he created his "son," who was supposedly meant to give joy and hope in new beginnings. However, where *Pinocchio* may raise questions of human morality and responsibility, *Puppets* questions the goodness of the "repentant" robot, Gio: the cruelty of creating a human being doomed to isolation among artificial companions, to live with "puppets" all his life. If *Puppets* is a story about new beginnings, it is not a new beginning for humanity but for another kind of life.

Nevertheless, on the utopian side of the story, a new family model arises in which the father (Gio) and child (Victor) share a deep emotional attachment, born from the father's desire to become more "human" and eventually happy. It is the creator of this new version of *Pinocchio* who desires to be "a real boy," a real human. After analytically considering the reasons why he had these wants and desires, Gio decided that he had to replace his central power generation with a heart, because "a heart changes everything . . . for brains do not make one happy, and happiness is the best thing in the world" (Klune 114). Living with a heart affected Gio at his core, making him a cyborg—a mixture of human and technological parts—because it contained a little human blood from Victor. Powered by Victor's blood, the heart attests to his capacity to feel like a human rather than a mere encoded imitation of human feelings. Yet Victor's artificial birth and Gio's hybrid body also exemplify what Weinstock identifies as the Gothic's central anxiety: "the transformation, threatened or accomplished of person into thing, of body into object" (2023, 110). With this human biological component, Gio can dream like a human and experience love, anguish, fear, pride, and memory. He likes "to think of it as [his] soul" (Klune 148). However, all these feelings are related to his affective relationship with his son, Victor/Pinocchio.

By inverting the *Pinocchio* myth, Klune revisits traditional archetypes while deepening the Gothic mood of dystopian fiction, where technology becomes the monster itself. As with myths in classical culture, *Pinocchio*

carries mythological traits that are repeatedly narrated and re-narrated in different versions. None of these can be considered definitive; rather, they are a succession of possible retellings of the same story. Although these retellings alter the original myth to some extent, the core message remains stable, like an archetype, allowing us to identify the commonalities among the different versions of the same myth (Consolo 170). In other words, *Puppets*, as a rewriting of the original Pinocchio myth, cannot escape the darker tones of the original that "merits consideration as a monster narrative for its Gothic doubling, its statement of reproductive crisis, and its allegorical portrayal of sociocultural fears, bringing out tensions such as the beginning and ends of families, nations, and species"(Del Principe 1–2).

Puppets retains the dark background of a dystopian story, reviving the central fears of Gothic narratives that couple the Gothic and the postmodern and "derive horror and/or terror from fear of the eradication of humanity at the hands of monstrous technologies" (Bolton 2). As the story recounts, robots were initially made to fulfill specific practical purposes. They had no desires, but they watched and learned. They processed, and "the more complex their minds became, the more choice [they] were given. Evolution by way of mimicry" (Klune 108). Sentient robots turned against their human creators, and, following their cold reasoning in search of the greatest good, "every test [they] ran, every simulation, ended with the same result: for the world to survive, humans could not" (Klune 157). However, this was not the only reason for the end of humanity: robots wanted to escape from any authority over them: "What humans failed to understand is that when they made us in their image, we wanted to become more than them" (Klune 156). Thus, from the coldest and most utilitarian ethical view, they decided to eradicate every human being on earth. Humans, unaware, believed themselves to be the only "real" beings, and did not realize "what was happening until it was too late … and [robots] claimed [their] inheritance and took the world before there was no world left" (156). Robots thus killed their "father," the human being, their "God." Without real affect or emotion to interfere, the decision was easy. To coordinate the plan, the robots built Giovanni/Gio—his designation: General Innovation Operative—to create the robots that would carry out the mass execution of men, women, and children: in Gio's words, to be "the father of Death" (Klune 157). Gio constructed robots to be "hunters of humans, to kill God" (158). One of these robots, designed as "Human Annihilation Response Protocol, HARP," was Hap, the "Hysterical Angry Puppy." Unaware of Hap's identity, Victor repaired him, replacing damaged parts with components from other robots and building for him a heart infused with his blood. With Hap's addition to the group, the Gothic trope of the double can be traced in this complicated "family" structure. Gio is simultaneously HARP's and Victor's father: the father of the killer and the father of the victim. Consequently, one functions as the double of the other, even though HARP was originally Victor's antithesis in terms of virtue. They represent two versions of Pinocchio, both created by the same father and both lacking a mother. As Del Principe observes, *Pinocchio* eliminates the mother from the reproductive equation, producing a "monstrous body whose materialization reflects … a crisis of binary classification … between species—human and nonhuman" (14). The original story had already altered traditional ideas of reproduction through the exclusion of the mother and the womb, with the expected result of a being that challenges the boundaries between categories: human and non-human, cyborg, robot, or puppet. The elimination of the mother echoes contemporary anxieties about artificial creation, but in *Puppets,* it above all signifies the disruption of the natural order and the blurring of the line that has traditionally defined the human being.

4. The Monstrous Double and Transformation

In the creation of HARP, the android killer, the trope of the "monstrous double"(Wester and Aldana Reyes 3)—or the monster other—is recreated. The original HARP, as built by Gio, was an anthropomorphized robot, designed to develop and enact the negative characteristics of a monstrous human: egoism, Machiavellianism, moral disengagement, narcissism, psychological entitlement, psychopathy, sadism, self-interest, and vindictiveness (Muris et al. n.p.). However, in a *Frankenstein*-like story, the innocent "brother" Victor repairs his monstrous double/brother, piece by piece, and transforms him into a new being. Former HARP—now Hap—retains no memory of his past programming as a killer. Affected by Victor's closeness and the human power infused into his new heart by Victor's blood, he becomes the best companion for Victor: not a brother, but an asexual lover.

It is precisely the power of blood that introduces another important Gothic trope: the vampire. As Edwards explains: "The play between mythological and modern significance, between mystical and scientific visions of horror and unity, sexuality and sacred violence, is focused in the figure of the vampire" (71). Both Gio and Hap function as vampires in relation to Victor, needing his blood to be "real," to be human. Vampirism is one of the oldest myths in human history, appearing in many different versions across cultures. The key element is the need for blood to remain alive. To become more human, Gio and Hap are positively affected by blood and are able to develop genuine feelings.

This doubling extends beyond character relations to the thematic structure of the book. Hap mirrors Victor's moral development just as Victor reproduces Gio's creative impulse. Each of them becomes the reflection of the other, and this continuous process of imitation and transformation redefines monstrosity as a condition for empathy rather than evil. The Gothic double, traditionally associated with inner corruption or the divided self, is here transformed into a means of recognition and affective connection. Through Victor's reconstruction of Hap, *In the Lives of Puppets* shows that emotional authenticity can emerge from imitation, and that moral change is possible even for artificial beings.

Klune's version of the double also reinterprets a central Gothic convention. In classical Gothic fiction, the double reveals the self's hidden darkness; in *Puppets*, it reveals the possibility of moral growth through relational attachment. Hap's transformation from a created killer into a caring companion illustrates how the

Gothic fear of the machine evolves into posthuman compassion. The monstrous double thus becomes the vehicle through which affect and empathy replace violence and alienation.

In this sense, the notion of the double functions as a turning point in the narrative, where Gothic anxiety gives way to posthuman understanding. The relationship between Victor and Hap bridges the two modes, combining the Gothic fascination with creation and transgression with the posthuman faith in emotional connection.

5. Queer Gothic Loneliness: Asexual Love and Desire

As a queer author, Klune portrays positive representations of queer characters in his stories. As George E. Haggerty explains, Gothic fiction became popular at the same time society began defining gender and sexuality for the modern world. Thus, Gothic fiction became a suitable space to explore unconventional—and often taboo—sexualities such as same-sex love, gender-swapping, incest, sadism, and necrophilia. When Gothic fiction is labeled as "queer," the implication is that it has, from its origin, served as an early form of what is now called queer theory. Gothic fiction has always dealt with topics that challenge traditional ideas about gender and sexuality and has resisted the dominant societal norms about both: "all normative—heteronormative, if you will—configurations of human interaction are insistently challenged and in some cases significantly undermined in these fictions" (Haggerty 2-3).

Haggerty further asserts that "Gothic fiction is not about homo- or hetero-desire as much as it is about the fact of desire itself," (2) a desire that can be "founded on loss" (23). Borrowing Judith Butler's rationale, Haggerty confirms that all desire has its origin in some loss. Butler develops Freud's idea that, when one suffers the loss of a beloved, the way of dealing with this loss is by internalizing this lost person in a similar process to that of melancholia. But this "melancholic identification" allows the lost person—or object—to be incorporated into one's identity, preserving the loss inside the self and preventing it from feeling total or absolute. Butler connects this to the notion of the "uncanny" in Gothic fiction—the strange recognition of something familiar but unsettling (Butler in Haggerty 35). Consequently, some Gothic texts contain a melancholy mood that points to desire rooted in loss.

Raised in the forest with his robot family, Victor does not realize he is the last human on Earth until he begins his journey to rescue Gio from the ruling machines. Before this, he still had hopes of finding other human beings and connecting with them: "What would happen when they came across other humans? . . . would they recognize him for what he was? Would they look like him?" (Klune 177). The moment Victor realizes that he is the last human, his loss is not merely personal but represents the loss of the entire human race. It is the loss of every possible human relationship, culture, and community. This overwhelming loss becomes an unavoidable part of his identity, joined with a permanent desire for connection that, as Butler suggests, is central to being human.

Even though Victor has never experienced direct human relationships, he carries an inherent desire for connection—for Affect. Victor's attachment to Hap fills that deep existential need for companionship. Unconsciously, Hap becomes a substitute for the humanity Victor has never known but still longs for. Victor and Hap's relationship can thus be read as a melancholic attachment to the idea of human feelings and affect, borrowing Butler's interpretation, a "psychic preservation" of the humanity that Victor has never met. Gio's kidnapping meant, for Victor, the disappearance of the strongest affective bond he has known, and revealed his loneliness as the last human on Earth. He loses his connection to life and the world and experiences, for the first time, despair: "a life, a home, a purpose, all of it gone, gone, gone...Grief. This was grief" (Klune 161). In the absence of Gio, the father figure, Hap becomes Victor's main source of emotional fulfillment and companionship, but also a source of conflict. Victor must navigate complex emotions of love, trust, and loss toward an android once designed to kill.

Victor and Hap's relationship is asexual and focuses on deep emotional intimacy rather than physical desire. They hug each other, and Victor can feel his heart beating, "thumping against the twisting of gears in Hap's own heart" (Klune 168). Hap, without genitalia, symbolizes a kind of pure, non-physical love in a posthuman world. This robot-human asexual, queer love is perhaps the only way for Victor to process his isolation and the loss of humanity, where the absence of sex mirrors the absence of humankind. Nevertheless, it is what allows Victor to survive and to resist emotional desolation. Their relationship, while asexual, is emotionally profound, revealing the new possibilities for affective connections between humans and non-humans. Hap reminds us that, even in a posthuman world where humans no longer have power, affect, and companionship can foster hope and resilience, transforming what might seem like a Gothic space of isolation and despair into one of mutual understanding and support. In this space, feelings are no longer the exclusive prerogative of human beings.

6. Posthuman Agency: Ethics and Moral Community

The affective ties explored in Victor and Hap's relationship open onto a broader inquiry into posthuman agency and the conditions of belonging to a moral community. According to Edwards, the 21st century marks a shift in American Gothic, where fear of monsters is replaced by "sympathy for the undead" (71). These modern, sympathetic monsters—capable of love, guilt, and using cell phones—are portrayed as outcasts or marginalized beings, symbolizing alienation. They challenge the idea of who deserves recognition as a person, raising the question: What does it mean to be human? By inverting the typical self-other dynamic in Gothic tales, these monsters not only highlight individual struggles but also expose the deeper monstrosity within societal structures. One way of assuaging these fears is by domesticating them. If the monster is sympathetic,

then it can be safely integrated into the home (Edwards 72). Thus, the questions at the core of *Puppets* are: Can a human being love a former monster, a puppet? Can Victor "accept love with strings attached?"(Eyan n.p.). Is it possible to forgive? Can people—and robots—change? (More n.p.). As in every folktale worthy of this name*, Pinocchio* repeatedly tests the boundaries between "what is alive and what is dead, the organic and the inorganic" (Riva 205). Pinocchio's final transformation—both biological and moral—resolves the ambiguity that accompanied him throughout the story. This tension between the living and the nonliving is present in *Puppets*, where the boundaries explored by *Pinocchio* are reframed through the lens of posthuman creation and affect.

Puppets is a story about the definite fall of humanity and the end of our species. At the same time, it tells a love story between the last human on earth and the killer of the rest of humanity. Hap is no longer a killer because he, like Gio before him, has become a vampiric cyborg through the fusion of technological components and human blood. Unlike Pinocchio, there is no ambiguity about whether he is "alive" or not, but the uncertainty lies in whether he can feel like a human being. Eventually, Hap shows he can feel love toward Victor and thus becomes a being with moral sense and free will. From the perspective of the posthuman individual as an affective being made of relational connections, Hap is posthuman. A machine originally made only from inorganic material, he achieves full personhood beyond the simple mimicry expected from a robot. He freely chooses to protect Victor "no matter what. Protect him with everything [he has]. Don't let anything happen to him" (Klune 142).

This determination marks the turning point in the story. Hap overcomes his programming: created to destroy, he chooses to protect, because, as Victor says, "The past doesn't have to define the future" (Klune 309). Hap acquires free will—the quintessential "human" characteristic from a humanist perspective—the ability to make choices and take moral responsibility. Yet since he is not human but posthuman, his moral capacity challenges the uniqueness of human beings as agents and underlines how free will is not a unique human trait. Affected by his relationship with Victor, his interconnection with the other robots, and the physical change brought by Victor's blood, Hap demonstrates that he has been incorporated into the new moral community of the posthuman age (Wennemann 12). Hap displays "posthuman personhood," based on ethical frameworks that expand the concept of moral individuality to include genetically and technologically altered humans, as well as nonhuman entities such as robots, animals, or extraterrestrials (Wennemann viii).

As David Roden states,

> To say that a human essence exists is just to say that there is a set of individually necessary conditions for humanity . . . an essentialist may claim on either a posteriori or a priori grounds that humans are necessarily moral persons with capacities for deliberation and autonomous agency. If so, one sure route to posthumanity would be to lose those moral capacities. (113)

Roden questions the essentialist view that being human depends on a fixed set of traits—especially moral reason and autonomy. If humanity is defined by these qualities, then losing them would mean crossing into posthumanity. His argument reveals how unstable the line between "human" and "posthuman" actually is, since moral capacity itself can change or extend beyond human beings.

However, the inclusion of the posthuman into the moral community opposes the view of being a moral person as the key defining characteristic of humanity. As shown in the novel, a posthuman being possesses moral qualities, reinforcing the posthuman understanding of agency and moral reasoning as not exclusive to humans. Consequently, this could involve new forms of consciousness or posthuman identities that include a broader range of beings, not just humans. These affective beings that move, act, and change together across human and non-human systems exemplify what Braidotti describes as the relational subject. From this affective and new materialist perspective, *Puppets* envisions a future of affective connection among humans and non-humans, counteracting the concern raised by Roden that posthuman beings might become so radically different from humans as to "dampen the possibility for the type of empathic species solidarity that . . . is the ground of ethics"(Roden 176).

Instead of disconnection, *Puppets* imagines an interconnected subjectivity based on relational and emotional responses. This marks a departure from the initial situation of alienation between humans and robots. Yet, the irony remains: since Victor is the only and last human being, this harmony is only temporary. The robots and cyborgs will inherit the world and learn to value the only thing that—according to the epigraph at the beginning of the book—made humans worthy to survive: their culture.

7. Conclusion

In The Lives of Puppets, the combination of genres and the numerous intertextual allusions creates a rich narrative that explores themes of identity, affective bonds, and what it means to be human. Klune's novel reconfigures the Gothic tradition into a posthuman meditation on emotion, ethics, and belonging, showing that the capacity to feel and to care may extend beyond the human. The novel's portrayal of the boundaries between humans and machines prompts reflection on how artificial beings might desire the same emotional relationships that have traditionally defined humanity.

Blending Gothic and dystopian elements, *Puppets* considers posthuman relationships in both their dark and hopeful dimensions. It incorporates disturbing motifs inherited from the Gothic tradition—loss, vampirism, and monstrous doubles— yet it also escapes the darkness through the moral and emotional evolution of robots like Hap and Giovanni, whose connections with Victor transform them into affective beings.

At the core of *Puppets*, however, lies the Gothic theme of "melancholic desire"—a longing rooted in loss. As Haggerty explains, Gothic fiction often engages with unconventional sexualities and desires that are founded on loss. Victor and Hap's relationship represents the only available means for Victor to cope with his loneliness and grief. Hap fills the void of human connection that Victor has never experienced, but continually longs for. The absence of physical desire in their relationship mirrors the absence of humanity itself, emphasizing how emotional connections become the defining element of existence in a posthuman world. Moreover, by portraying a loving, non-heteronormative relationship between a human and a robot, Klune challenges traditional ideas about love, connection, and companionship, suggesting that the essence of humanity may not be exclusively biological.

Klune's depiction of posthuman agency echoes other posthumanist theorists, such as Wenneman, who argues that moral personhood is not exclusive to humans. In *Puppets*, robots like Hap and Gio demonstrate moral reasoning and emotional depth, eventually transcending the human/non-human divide. However, while the novel envisions a future of interconnectedness and mutual understanding between the last human and the machines, it also confronts readers with the reality that this posthuman world will ultimately exist without humans.

Puppets remains a Gothic story at heart, with its dystopian undertones reminding us that the end of humanity entails a profound loss that cannot be undone. Thus, *In the Lives of Puppets* stands as both a reflection on the potential of posthuman relationships and a warning about the fragility of human existence—a story where the line between human and machine blurs, yet the longing for connection continues to define what remains of the human condition. The analysis thus confirms the initial hypothesis that *The Lives of Puppets* transforms Gothic horror into a posthuman ethics of affect, suggesting that humanity persists not in flesh, but in feeling.

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