

FROM GUILT TO GHOSTS: POSTHUMAN SUBJECTIVITY AND FRAGMENTED SELVES IN *THE GHOSTWRITER*

Niblin Niknash. A.N

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, College of Science and Humanities,
SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur, Chennai, India.

Dr. C.S. Arunprabu

Assistant Professor, Department of English, College of Science and Humanities,
SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur, Chennai, India.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34293/shanlax.9789361632587.ch016>

Abstract

The Ghostwriter by Alessandra Torre is a philosophically and psychologically deep novel that dwells on the issues of death, trauma, as well as identity through the lens of the character of the famous novelist, Helena Ross, who is dying and is faced with the question of repressed personal experiences. This work applies existential psychology by Rollo May alongside posthumanist theory in exploring the connection between the encounter of death, guilt, and isolation by Helena that leads to both a personal and relational, posthuman, expansion of self. The paradigm by May clarifies the inner works of existential dread, guilt, and creative courage whereas the posthumanism presents storytelling as a means by which identity, voice, and ethical obligation can be maintained beyond the physical body. This paper assumes that the authorship of Helena functions as a doubled existential and posthuman project: it is both the authentic attempt at being in contact with mortality and pain and at the same time an attempt to project identity, influence, and meaning into entrenched relational and cultural patterns. The study demonstrates that the meeting of existential psychology and posthumanism offers a rewarding paradigm to the analysis of literature with an exceptional focus on the complex connection between human interiority, creative agency and posthuman continuity

Keywords: Existential Psychology, Posthumanism, Death, Guilt, Creative audacity.

Introduction

The *Ghostwriter* is a compelling psychological novel of Alessandra Torre released in 2017 and has fully explored the issue of trauma, mortality, and the precarious nature of identity. The story itself revolves around Helena Ross, the best-seller author, who is emotionally detached and highly disciplined of herself. Helena is confronted with the reality of the terminal ailment, secrets she has been longing to know, broken relationships and imminence of death. Torre is trying to bring out this confrontation not just as a personal tragedy but as an existential struggle that undermines the lines between silence and confession, misery and purpose, withdrawal and creative expression. Psychological depth of the work is achieved through visualizing identity as something uncertain and changeable under the impact of the unresolved guilt and existential fear and focusing on the narrative as the source of survival and final attempt toward self-invention. The depth of the novel in terms of psychological content is in the treatment of the theme of identity, regrets and suppressed pain. The perception of Helena as a strict, successful author hides a secret life of the unresolved sorrows, failed relationships and secrets that are hidden long enough.

This conflict between the outside power and the inner messiness points to the fact that the novel explores the fragility of identity. The fact that Helena says nothing about her trauma serves not only as repression but also as a way of coping with existential withdrawal as Rollo May notes the tendency of human beings to withdraw under the fear of facing reality in the face of overwhelming fear. This silence is however broken down throughout the story, transformed into confession through the discipline of authorship.

Existential psychology by Rollo May provides a solid basis on the examination of psychological suffering of Helena Ross in the book *The Ghostwriter*. His concepts of existential anxiety, existential guilt, and creative courage clarify the internal conflict that is typical of the way Helena goes through. Anxiety is viewed by May as the unavoidable tension based on the perception of freedom, mortality, and absurdity variables that affect the struggle of the Helena with her terminal illness. Similarly, his idea of existential guilt as a result of not acknowledging duty, the inability to realize his potential, non-committal to any particular choices is similar to the long history of repression, emptiness and lack of emotion Helena had. Finally, the idea of creativity as the existential gesture of courage that May has is quite consistent with the idea of storytelling as the ultimate, redemptive project that Helena adopts. To this extent, the psychology of May is the internal struggle between death and meaning that drives the story.

The strategy by May has a number of constraints. Even though existential psychology is concentrated on the existence of the individual in the world, its final result remains to be a human approach, giving special attention to the interaction of the autonomous subject in the face of mortality. It does not appropriately take into consideration the ways in which narratives identities and remnants of subjectivity persist beyond the corporeal body. It is at this point that posthumanism comes in as a necessary auxiliary viewpoint. Posthumanism emphasizes the fact that the human person is constantly in relations with other people, with language, with technology, with ecological systems and with nonhuman. As explained by the posthumanist theory, the story of Helena is not only existential due to self-reflection but also a posthuman manifestation of strength. The written account as a permanent object, goes beyond the boundaries of the physical life of Helena and sends her voice into a realm that embraces readers, memory, and cultural imagination. Story telling is a representation of posthuman afterlife an inscription that challenges mortality by projecting identity beyond the confines of the human body. Although May emphasizes genuineness and courage to invent in the non-being, posthumanism emphasizes the power of storytelling to outgrow the human constraints, which makes the novel a fruitful place to solve the two perspectives. A combination of the existential psychology by Rollo May and posthumanism enables the dual-layered analysis of the existential psychology to explain the psychological depth of the introspective experience of the encounter with death on the one hand and posthumanism to recast her story as a relational and enduring trace that persists even after death, hence, disrupting the boundaries between life and death, self and the Other presence and absence. This twofold approach adds to the understanding of the identity dilemma of Helena and makes it possible to define *The Ghostwriter* as a text that explores the limits of human life

and the possibility of maintaining narratives in a posthuman continuum. This research paper argues that *The Ghostwriter* by Alessandra Torre introduces narrative of a confrontation as existential and survival strategy posthuman, where identification, blame, and death are maneuvered both within and beyond the human situation. Existential-psychological perspective holds that the terminal illness, the repressed trauma of Helena Ross forces her to face the death, responsibility and authenticity. Storytelling is her ultimate creative courage, a way of transforming silence, repression, existential guilt into a narrative of meaning and self-reconstruction, following the point of view of Rollo May about creativity as a true response to the fear of non-being. Nonetheless, through the prism of posthumanist insight, the authorship of Helena acquires an additional dimension: the story becomes a trace that breaks the boundaries of her material body, spreading her identity and voice throughout a spectrum of relationships of the readers, memory, and cultural imagination. This fiction disrupts humanist ideas of a stable, independent self and redefines identity as dynamic, relational and beyond human finitude. The paper will propose that the story by Torre, speaks of duality of human life, the inevitable face of death and guilt, and the versatility of the narrative to overcome human limitations, giving meaning, agency, and presence to the posthuman world.

Theoretical Framework

Existential Psychology of Rollo May

The existential psychology developed by Rollo May emphasizes on the human experience where freedom, choice, responsibility and mortality prevail. Unlike the deterministic methodologies, May stresses on subjective experience indicating the contradictory nature of the human existence. The main concepts are existential dread, existential guilt, freedom, isolation, authenticity and creative courage. Existential anxiety is a result of being aware of death, being autonomous, being alone, and not having intrinsic importance. The existential anxiety of Helena Ross is made worse by the fact that she has terminal sickness, and she has to face the constraints of being alive and the consequences of the suppressed trauma. Existential guilt is a result of the recognition of the disregarded duties and unmet possibilities. The regret that Helena shows is ethical as well as personal, reflecting how she tries to invade the persona displayed on the surface, and her failure in the background. The two phenomena of freedom and responsibility relate to each other, as May argues that making real decisions requires taking into consideration the consequences of their behavior. Helena has autonomy by narration, and she is reasserting agency and making peace with the past failures. Isolation is an inherent element of human life, and it is expressed through the stoic and secretive feelings and emotions of Helena. Finally, her shift to writing as a way of existential engagement is emphasized by sincerity and the courage of the imagination: she faces the issue of sadness, fixes a fractured identity, and creates meaning in the face of mortality with the help of narrative. The application of the May framework to the analysis of the case of Helena Ross clarifies the internal process of the person and how guilt, fear, and solitude affect her psychological processes, and how narrating stories is a transformational act of creative courage.

Posthumanism and the De-emphasis of the Human

Posthumanism challenges the humanist view of human exceptionalism, and emphasizes relational, networked, and distributed identities beyond the physical body. The both internal comprehension and the contacts with the texts, readers, technology and greater ecological and cultural systems impact identity. The authorship of Helena in *The Ghostwriter* depicts this relational identity. Her story allows her voice and agency to survive even after her death, creating what is meant by posthumanism as a posthuman trace. Writing transforms the identity into a social phenomenon and involves communication with the readers, memory, and cultural systems. Posthumanism explores the issues pertaining to the mortality, technology, environmental sustainability, and the disintegration of the self. The story of Helena responds to these concerns, which is the way of continuing the relationships and survival beyond the subjectivity of individuals. The deaf and the word are redefined in the posthuman set-up: her previous isolation contrasts with the permanent eloquence of her story, which shows that imagination and moral presence can survive the limitations of bodily life.

Towards an Existential-Posthuman Discourse

Existential psychology focuses on the inner struggles of Helena her anxiousness, her guilt, and her quest towards veritableness and the posthumanism shifts emphasis to the exterior, interpersonal and lasting features of her story. Both paradigms agree on the problem of mortality, responsibility, and identity, but they are different as to the definition of the self and time. May insists on the self-sufficient, autonomous person who is going to die in a moment, and posthumanism subverts wholeness and locates the self in the social and cultural lines that transcend the physical. A combination of these perspectives enriches the literature study as it shows that narrative is a personal and a social exercise. The existence of mortality, trauma, and solitude by Helena Ross is an existential journey of authentic self-expression and posthumanism, which further enhances her presence and influence in networks that are not limited to her physical presence. This discussion also points to the possibilities of applying a psychological and posthumanist approach to analyze literature, with the focus on the engagement between interiority and relationality and ongoing creative agency.

Helena Ross and the Existential Confrontation

The quest of Helena Ross in *The Ghostwriter* is inherently affected by her exposure to death. A terminal disease is identified, and she has no choice but to face the imminent death and massive fear of not living. This consciousness can be seen in every side of her life making her reflect more on the past choices, submerged trauma, and the relationships she has neglected. According to Rollo May, Helena has existential anxiety, which is a universal tension that arises out of the perception of the finiteness of life and the necessity to draw meaning out of the same. The disease is not only the deterrent of life but is a stimulus to self-reflection and forces her to deal with facts previously avoided and consequences of the denial of emotions and avoidance.

Silence and guilt fill the mind of Helena that leads to existential conditions that interfere with her self-identity. The fact that she has long repressed painful experiences and has lost emotions towards other people causes internal conflict in her and makes her identity fragmented and unstable. This disintegration is intensified by the feeling of guilt which May knows to be natural response to inability to live in the real world or be fully responsible of whatever one does. The personal and ethical guilt of Helena is due to the understanding that her carefully built image in the publicity has helped to hide her life of avoiding, and that her passive nature has made her inability to keep her emotional commitments. The combination of silence, guilt, and broken identity summarizes the state of the existential vulnerability of the human condition with a particular focus on the psychological implications of the experience of mortality. Helena also applies storytelling as a tool of reconciliation and self-reconstruction in the face of fear and isolation. Writing is an act of existential courage, which helps to turn fear, despair, guilt into a story that establishes agency and coherence. May, in his philosophy, asserts that the creative expression goes beyond common coping; it is an intense involvement in the truth of non-being that enables people to face honestly the despair and make sense in the face of mortality. In her work, Helena takes apart the emotional walls that have defined her life, acknowledging the past failures as she builds up a clear testament of identity. It is in this sense that storytelling acts as a confession and a creation is a deliberate display of being genuine that pulls together fragmented identities into a unified narration as a confirmation of existence despite its impending end.

Posthuman Aspects of Narrative in the Ghostwriter

Leaving the existential setting, the story of Helena Ross by *The Ghostwriter* can be understood as an essentially posthuman engagement where narration is a survival mechanism that exceeds her corporeal life, which is too small. The fact of her terminal illness brings out the limits of death, but the discourse she creates enables her voice, identity, and creative agency to persist beyond her life to a relational axis involving readers, memory, and cultural imagination. Narrative is a posthuman continuity mechanism that allows the consciousness and moral contemplations of Helena to continue with the deterioration of her bodily form. The form of identity that Helena has in the story proves to be relational and discontinuous. Her identity is not solely constructed out of her own mind but, instead, the relations of her narrative to the rest of the readers who take it in, the memories it prompts and the broader cultural structures that it penetrates. Posthumanism emphasizes the idea of dispersed selfhood and assumes that identity is not a stable and self-sufficient thing, but we can learn about ourselves and develop through our interactions with human and nonhuman networks. The example of Helena as an author is the example of relationality, which demonstrates that individuality can be conveyed, shared, and rebuilt through creative activity extending beyond personal boundaries. Storytelling is a posthuman trace, which destabilizes the conventional separation between presence and absence, self and other. The story of Helena leaves a strong impression that cannot be erased even after her death and challenges traditional humanist views of death and the finality of experience.

Her voice in a textual form is that which pulls her lived life and the postmortem appropriation of her story together, with the element of creativity appearing to serve as an instrument of relational and moral continuity. There is silence and voice operating in a posthuman structure in the story. The isolation and the restrictions of individual subjectivity depicted by the seclusion and repression of Helena in the past; however, her adoption of storytelling transforms this silence into a permanent kind of expression. Her experiences and feelings, as well as her ethical perceptions, are not confined to what she is conscious of, which means that voice does not originate inside the human body and can also be expressed in a relational, posthuman way. The story by Torre is a display of how identity, presence, and ethical agency can be extended and reconfigured by storytelling and in which artistic expression is a medium connecting existential encounter and posthuman survival.

Convergence of Existential Psychology and Posthumanism

Psychological and philosophical sides of the journey of Helena Ross that are shown in *The Ghostwriter* are most comprehensible when the existential psychology and posthumanism are considered collectively. The model by Rollo May explains the internal struggle of Helena and the depth of her involvement in mortality, shame and loss of identity. The perspective of posthumanism, however, extends this argument, emphasizing that her story and artistic activity does not exist in her bodily form only but spreads through relational, cultural, and textual networks that continue to operate even after her demise. Existential psychology is focused on personal accountability and true choice, and posthumanism extends that responsibility into a continuum of relations and ethics, which involves relationships with others, the continuing influence of her story, and the interweaving of identity in more-than-human systems. The existential guilt of her awareness of her unfulfilled and neglected responsibilities and unexploited potential changes into posthuman guilt because her stories become an inlet of ethical activity that transcends her personal existence. Storytelling in the work of Torre can be seen as an existential-posthuman project, which follows the psychological need of self-reconciliation as well as the posthuman ability to continue and influence. Helena practices pure self-expression and relational projection, using her inner struggle to form an ethical and creative legacy that will linger on even after her death. This two-sided reading suggests how literature is a place, a site, of intersection of existential and posthuman concerns: that individual suffering, anxiety, seeking of meaning are not self-processed but rather tend to be extruded into continual webs of power. The combination of various theoretical approaches in the study of literature has a productive prospect, as Torre emphasizes in his hybrid approach. The novel illustrates that identity, mortality and ethical duty are both relative and internal as well as subjected to human subjectivity but also in broader posthuman systems. Combining the fields of existential psychology and posthumanism, the story offers a complex model on understanding the nature of the human experience, creativity and survival, as offering a model to analyze literature that ensures the acknowledgment of the psychological depth of characters and posthuman potential of the narrative.

Conclusion

Through *The Ghostwriter*, Alessandra Torre presents the experience of mortality, trauma and identity of Helena Ross as a multifaceted psychological and philosophic adventure. The issue of identity that Helena is experiencing guilt, silence, and fragmentation is tackled via the storytelling that would be defined as an existential response and posthuman response. Her story has a genuine encounter with terror, death and unresolved emotional baggage that resembles the emphasis of Rollo May on artistic courage as a way of facing non-being. Posthumanistically, the story of Helena is no longer about her physical appearance, but it projects her identity, voice, and moral responsibility into relation, textual, and cultural networks. The novel presents storytelling as a two-fold task, serving to the inner demands of the human mind, as well as the external and relational opportunities of narrative to survive beyond the confined self. Theoretical implications of introducing existential psychology to posthumanism are massive to the study of literature. This broad approach helps to conduct the analysis of internal psychological processes, and also relational and interdependent elements of identity, which allows researchers to investigate the ways in which characters cope with personal crisis, as well as how they affect greater systems of meaning. The discussion links existential concerns that are inward to those that are outward posthuman, showing how literature could help to show the continuity of identity, moral responsibility, and creative agency beyond traditional humanism paradigms. This paper puts human agony, disgrace, and sense-making into context in a more-than-human spectrum and holds that identity and agency are not just located in individual subjectivity, but permeate the relationships, texts, and historical cultures. The storytelling can serve as an ethical affair, a creative endurance, and an existential resolution, as is the case with Torre, and this story can serve as a model of understanding how literature deals with the interaction of human constraints and enduring relational impact. *The Ghostwriter* shows the ability of literature to explore the field of intersection of psychological complexity and posthuman potential, and it is important to note the relevance of interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks to literary criticism.

References

1. Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity press, 2013.
2. Effinger, Elizabeth. "Beckett's Posthuman: The Ontology Of." *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, vol. 23, no. 1, Aug. 2012, pp. 369–81, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18757405-023001024>. Accessed 13 Jan. 2022.
3. Herbrechter, Stefan. "Posthumanism, Subjectivity, Autobiography." *Subjectivity*, vol. 5, no. 3, Aug. 2012, pp. 327–47, <https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2012.13>. Accessed 30 Sept. 2019.
4. MacCormack, Patricia. *Posthuman Ethics*. Routledge, 2016.
5. May, Rollo. *Discovery of Being: Writings in Existential Psychology*. Norton, 1995.
6. ---. *Existential Psychology*. McGraw-Hill, 1969.
7. N Katherine Hayles. *How We Became Posthuman Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. University Of Chicago Press, 1999.

8. Phelan, Dylan. "I Feel, Therefore I Am: Trauma, Memory, and Posthuman Liberation in Blade Runner (1982) and WestWorld (2016)." *Moveable Type*, vol. 14, no. 1, UCL Press, Nov. 2022, <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.1755-4527.128>.
9. Reeves, Clement. *The Psychology of Rollo May*. Jossey-Bass, 1977.
10. Schneider, Kirk J., and Rollo May. *The Psychology of Existence: An Integrative, Clinical Perspective*. McGraw-Hill, 1995.
11. Tillich, Paul. *The Courage to Be*. Yale University Press, 1952.
12. Torre, Alessandra. *The Ghostwriter*. 2017.
13. Tripathi RL. "Fragmented Selves: Identity, Consciousness and Reality in the Digital Age." *Deleted Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, Jan. 2024, <https://doi.org/10.23880/oajda-16000148>.
14. van der Zaag, Annette-Carina. "On Posthuman Subjectivity." *Journal of Cultural Economy*, vol. 9, no. 3, July 2015, pp. 330–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2015.1040436>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2022.
15. Wolfe, Cary. *What Is Posthumanism?*. University Of Minnesota Press, 2010.
16. Wongchalard, Natawan. "Memory and Posthuman Subjectivity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *MANUSYA: Journal of Humanities*, vol. 28, no. 1, June 2025, pp. 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1163/26659077-20252802>. Accessed 12 July 2025.