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“Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?”: Functions of the “Unspeakable” in American Gothic Literature

The aim of this summer research project is to investigate the unspeakable and the limits of language in American Gothic literature—the deliberate silences, irruptions, contradictions, omissions, and other moments when the text either deliberately or perhaps unintentionally violates the conventions of written language—in order to explore their implications for socio-historical mindsets, for the self-conscious construction of “American” identity, and for human psychology. Having previous coursework that provides background in both American Gothic literature in general and the notion of “unspeakability” specifically, I aim to use my understanding of the inexpressible as a baseline for a larger study of its implications in different kinds of texts, and will use my summer research to provide the groundwork for what will become my Honors thesis in the spring. Thus far, with the help of Eric Savoy’s Gothic theory, I have defined the unspeakable as the things that defy articulation—often things so traumatic that they persistently haunt us but refuse to be identified, described, articulated, or explained. In my paper for my Gothic American literature class, I incorporated Eve Sedgwick’s argument regarding the culturally specific yet multivalent nature of what constitutes “unspeakability”; she argues in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* that it is not necessarily that one thing is literally unspeakable, but that for a certain culture (or a text representative of that culture), particular things can be so anxiety-producing or traumatic that they comprise the unspeakable for that culture. To briefly review my findings in that paper, I found that in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and in some of Edgar Allan

Poe's Gothic short stories, the inexpressible is manifested in a kind of excess of language that yields no definitive information or conclusion, and that this excessive but insufficient explanation signals a kind of cultural trauma that becomes the "unspeakable" for that text. For example, in Poe's "William Wilson," linguistic excess (when this excess of words draws attention to its inability to contain definitive meaning) appears in moments of anxiety over the stability and uniqueness of the self, implicating a larger cultural insecurity of individual and national selfhood in a 19th century America which had only recently declared independence and had yet to fully distinguish-itself culturally from Britain. In Faulkner's novel, his excess of language (sentences that last many pages with clauses piled upon clauses until the reader feels overwhelmed with information so abundant that it seems to add up to nothing at all) resists prioritizing, insisting on the simultaneous existence of past and present. The grammatically insistent simultaneity of history and present time suggests a profound anxiety over the impossibility of escaping history. This anxiety would be especially relevant and troubling for a region (the South) and a nation implicated in the immorality of slavery. Both authors, then, have a characteristic use of inexpressibility that suggests the limits of semantics and the existence of something that is, for that text or author, outside of expression.

For my summer research project, then, I set out to look at what kinds of things cannot be or refuse to be expressed within certain texts, to examine the limitations of language and the mind, and to map the implications of the unspeakable for the American narrative. The goal was to broaden my study to include texts of different periods or literary sub-genres; then, once I had a clearer understanding of the uses and effects of unspeakability, to narrow my focus and direct my project toward an increased understanding of the inexpressible—how it functions in American literature and what its

broader implications are. I originally chose to focus on primary texts dealing with different genres, decades, and styles within the scope of the Gothic in order to conduct a kind of survey of the unspeakable throughout differing texts. From this starting point, I decided to read Edgar Allan Poe's short stories (some of the more supernatural stories that raise questions about the kinds of things that resist articulation), Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. I also added Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to the list because of its treatment of silence and mental illness in what I thought might be a kind of psychological unspeakable. I chose these particular texts because each grapples with a kind of silence, a need for an explanation that remains insufficient to contain the meaning towards which it strives, and/or grammatical disruption gesturing towards inexpressibility. I believed the texts would utilize the unspeakable in various ways, and I set out to explore the nature and significance of the things that are not or cannot be said.

I thought continuing with Poe would help me solidify a background and starting point of inexpressibility in American literature, even a use of the unspeakable to which some of my later texts might be responding. For this reason, I also looked at some of Poe's essays on his compositional process and theories of language. In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe claims to choose a particular effect he would like to induce in the reader, and then to carefully select literary devices that create that effect. If we believe in this compositional process (which we can to some extent but also perhaps should question Poe's insistence on his calculated rationality), it suggests that he is very conscious of word choice—that he recognizes the fear invoked by what is left out or not spoken, and that he deliberately adds elements of unspeakability to his texts for the purpose of creating an uncanny dramatic effect. The unspeakable in Poe's stories is likely

partly a result of this hyper-consciousness of effect, although it is also possible that in some areas Poe is in fact reaching the limitations of his own expression. The almost preposterous excess of language in stories such as “William Wilson” suggests that there are moments in which Poe unintentionally confronts anxieties (such as anxiety over selfhood) over which he himself lacks narrative control. Through my further examination of Poe’s stories, I found the uses of the inexpressible to generally agree with my previous conclusion that the unspeakable was manifested in moments of some kind of anxiety. I confirmed my finding that Poe’s texts gesture towards certain anxieties or truths rather than clearly articulating them, and that in stories like “William Wilson” and “The Man of the Crowd,” these anxieties are largely connected to the instability of the self. I therefore used Poe as a kind of starting off point for unspeakability in American literature.

While Poe operates in a realm of imagination and exaggeration, I thought Capote’s self-described “nonfiction novel” would offer an exploration of the “real” historical functions of the unspeakable in relation to its fictional uses for Poe and Morrison. Because *In Cold Blood* is based on the true story of a horrific and inexplicable murder, I thought it would make an interesting study in its need for explanation. I found that one of the most disturbing and Gothic aspects of the novel is its continued return to a need to explain a crime that seems utterly without motivation. There is a refusal to accept the existence of a human who could commit such a crime without a real reason, and who could do so without feeling any remorse. Even though the novel is nonfiction, the story told is Capote’s reading of the murders, and for Capote, the problem seems not to be the inability to express, but the possibility that some people are without a human “soul”. It is less that the motivation for the killing lies in some realm of inexpressibility, and more that there is a lack of what is recognizably human in the killers at all. *In Cold*

Blood is not directly about the insufficiency of language, but about the troubling notion that some humans are “inhuman”. This is very relevant to the study of Gothic literature, but it took me quite far from my original questions regarding the syntax and themes of inexpressibility. At this point in my project, I had to ask myself whether I wanted to do a broader overview of the manifestations of inexpressibility in the Gothic, with a somewhat general argument about how they each indicate similar cultural or psychological anxieties, or whether I wanted to aim for a more narrow argument about a few texts in particular. I decided that it would be more conclusive, challenging, and interesting to go for a more focused argument, and for this reason, I opted to let go of *In Cold Blood* since it strayed a little too far from the grammatical and thematic registers of inexpressibility, and dealt more with troubling questions about the human psyche.

In Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, I looked at various forms of silence—the muteness of the protagonist, Billy Bibbit’s stutter, etc. I found, however, that the silence in the novel is often “forced” by the oppressive agents of the “administration,” and thus is more a comment on the terrifying uniformity and oppression of society, and less a remark on the limitations of language. This novel, and my recognition of its unsuitability for my project, helped me to arrive at the narrower project I have developed now, focusing on the syntactical and thematic registers of an unspeakability that remains unspeakable. Ultimately, most “silences” in Kesey’s novel gain expression by its conclusion, making the text (although still a masterpiece in American literature and an important cultural comment) distinctly less Gothic in its treatment of silence. In fact, although Chief is mute to the other characters, he is still our narrator, and thus actually “speaks” to us throughout the entire text; at the conclusion of the text, he even speaks out loud, making the text more of a comment on resistance to

oppression, and compromising a reading of it as a manifestation of the forms of unspeakability on which my project is focused. The “Combine”, what Chief calls the standardizing, oppressive society around him, constitutes a kind of resistance of definition in its vastness and its power, but this type of unspeakable is much more clear and much less culturally complex than what I wanted to explore in my final project. This is not to say that Kesey’s novel is not a complex text (it certainly is, and remains one of my favorite novels), but more that it did not yield a new or expanding perspective on unspeakability in particular that I felt would be beneficial to my goals for this specific research.

Finally, I turned to Morrison’s *Beloved*, looking at its engagement with the unspeakable on racial and psychological terms. I noticed that the text dealt with the limits of language in several different ways, so after reading the novel twice I made a list of every moment in the text that could touch on unspeakability in some way. Based on my careful and repeated readings of the novel, I developed the following set of discrete modes of unspeakability at work:

Grammatical Irruptions as Signals of Inexpressible Experiences

Several passages fit with my previous understanding of unspeakability as a grammatical device and thematic element that gestures towards an anxiety or trauma too awful to be articulated. For example, when Stamp Paid asks Paul D if he ran away because of the infanticide or because of Beloved’s physical presence in the house, Paul D’s response hints at the inexpressibly horrific experiences of slave life:

A shudder ran through Paul D. A bone-cold spasm that made him clutch his knees. He didn't know if it was bad whiskey, nights in the cellar, pig fever, iron bits, smiling roosters, fired feet, laughing dead men, hissing grass, rain, apple blossoms, neck jewelry, Judy in the slaughterhouse, Halle in the butter, ghost-white stairs, chokecherry trees, cameo pins, aspens, Paul A's face, sausage or the loss of a red, red heart. 'Tell me something, Stamp.' Paul D's eyes were rheumy. 'Tell me this one thing. How much is a nigger supposed to take? Tell me. How much?' 'All he can,' said Stamp Paid. 'All he can.' 'Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?' (277).

Here, the unspeakable that is slavery registers as a disruption in the grammar of the text. The chaotic listing of these images and objects associated with Paul D's experiences as a slave demonstrates the insufficiency of the language to contain the sum of terrible experience that is just too much for words; there is no prioritizing of information and the images given are almost too much to process. Additionally, Paul D's desperately repeated question, "Why?," suggests his incapacity to comprehend, process, or manage the things he has experienced. The repetition and excessive listing are examples of a specific unspeakable trauma or anxiety, and fit into my previous definition of the unspeakable.

Refusal to Tell or Accept: The Insistence on Silence

There are also moments in which the characters refuse to accept, recount, or remember certain things. Unlike my previous observations of unspeakability, however, it is not necessarily that they do not have access to these traumatic memories, but that they choose to keep them shut away. For example, during a conversation about their lives as slaves, Paul D thinks, "Saying more might push them both to a place they couldn't get back from. He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be"(86). The characters have the power to declare certain

subjects off limits, and the reader does not gain full access to those subjects. It's as if in some way, Morrison gives this group of people (from whom everything has been kept) a claim in human experience—a place that African Americans can declare theirs alone. So these things are not “spoken,” but that doesn't mean they are incapable of being communicated or understood for the people who experienced them. Morrison claims this kind of silence for her characters; it is a kind of ownership.

Reference to the Limitations of “Conventional” Language

There are several moments in which the text makes direct reference to the limited, biased, racist, or insufficient nature of words or language. There is something about the slave experience that resists being contained or expressed by the language of the people who are doing the enslaving. For example, when Paul D shows Sethe the newspaper article about Sethe's “murder” of her daughter, wordlessly requesting an explanation, the narrator tells us that “Sethe could recognize only seventy-five printed words[...]but she knew that the words she did not understand hadn't any more power than she had to explain”(190). The newspaper article and its words are *White*—language is the domain of the White. Sethe recognizes that some things can't be put into words, and here words don't seem to be sufficient to communicate the instinct and necessity inherent in her actions (taken to only to prevent her daughter from being taken back into slavery). Here and in multiple other passages, *Beloved* directly references the limitations of traditional forms of language.

Non-Linguistic or Alternative Forms of Communication

In response to the limited nature of language and its omission of the African American voice, Morrison utilizes alternative forms of communication within the novel—forms of expression that are outside of what a contemporary White audience traditionally understands as language. These alternate forms of communication are primal, imagistic, or sometimes linguistic but used in a non-traditional way. The primary examples within the text are expression through song or other types of sound, expression through imagery, communication through the body, the use of non-English languages, or (in the case of *Beloved*'s speech and especially her "monologue" chapters) a manipulation of the English language so that it is more basic and elemental. One instance of nonverbal communication occurs in Paul D's memory of the horrors of his slavery in Georgia, when he remembers of the slaves, "Not one spoke to each other. At least not with words. The eyes had to tell what there was to tell: 'Help me this mornin; 's bad'; 'I'm a make it'; 'New man'; 'Steady now steady'"(127). The men, not allowed to speak, are connected by the slave experience in a way that allows them to communicate in nonverbal ways. There is a sense that this group of people has been excluded from traditional language, and must communicate in other ways that are able to express their experiences. Another example of less traditional communication is when Sethe remembers an important message spoken to her during her childhood before she was at Sweet Home plantation, but cannot remember the exact words of the message because she no longer speaks the African language in which it was spoken. Sethe remembers the substance of the message regardless of its words, because its words were of a language that does not exclude Sethe and her people—a Black language. Her other memories of this childhood place are only of "singing and dancing and how crowded it was"(73)—

sound (but not words), body language, images, and a message without words. Here and in many other areas of the text, Morrison manipulates conventional conceptions of communication and expression. Even linguistic communication shifts so that it becomes less like the esoteric English speech of Schoolteacher (one of the cruelest men on the plantation), and more like a basic, elemental, and substantial form of expression that is able to communicate in ways that traditional language is not. Beloved herself expresses the difficulty of articulating images, memories, and the feelings associated with those memories when she asks, “how can I say things that are pictures”(248).

The fact that Sethe remembers an important message told in an African language (that Sethe no longer speaks) suggests that there is something about the insufficiency of *these* (English) words from *this* language to contain, include, or communicate certain experiences or people. In other words, these words are only sufficient to communicate a certain people or experience, while others are excluded from this language—and therefore their experiences cannot be contained within it. For Morrison, the limits of language are in a *sense* universal (words in general are incapable of containing the meaning they strive to express), but also distinctly racial and historical. Language is *especially* limited for the people excluded from participation in it (and in the economic, social, and political power it enables and represents). The Black experience, and the slave experience specifically, is not permitted to fully enter into this White-dominated, imperialistic discourse. The use of other forms of “language” within the novel creates an expressive space for a group that has been excluded from what contemporary American readers see as “typical” American discourse.

Morrison, therefore, explores the limitations of what her contemporary White audience accepts as “traditional” language. The text seems to recognize that there is too much to say and that words are insufficient to contain that kind of meaning, especially these particular (White) words trying to contain truths, experiences, and voices that are entirely beyond them. The novel thus looks to other forms of communication that allow the participation of the Black community. These alternative modes of expression accompany the recognition that the dominant and traditional forms of narrative language have been imperialistic and White, excluding the African American experience. Morrison thus manipulates these “White” words to invent a new kind of narrative that gives Black experience its own place in language. In other words, while Morrison seems to prioritize types of “language” or expression or communication that are not necessarily linguistic, or at least that do not conform to White, imperialist, typical forms of language as it is commonly understood, she also chose to tell this story via a novel. In using the English (White, imperialistic, racist) language in a novel, she would seem to undermine the idea that other forms of expression (like images) are superior. Yet, like Abdellatif Khayati suggests in "Representation, Race, and the 'Language' of the Ineffable in Toni Morrison's Narrative," precisely in Morrison's incorporation of these other forms of expression into White discourse, she gives Black history and Black experience a place within that discourse. She claims a place that (paradoxically) simultaneously belongs to only to African Americans, but is also an active part of the American discourse that is treated as White; Morrison uses that White, racist language to create a space for African American expression, claiming a place that is distinctly Black, but also a part of American discourse.

My next step towards my Honors thesis will be to closely re-examine *Absalom, Absalom!* and my existing reading of that novel in light of what I have seen in *Beloved*. There are ways in which Morrison seems to respond to Faulkner, and I want to investigate what she deliberately does similarly and differently within her novel. I already see that for both Morrison and Faulkner, the most important truths or experiences often lie outside of the limits of definitive or denotative language. Both also use grammatical techniques regarding certain subjects (namely, slavery) that suggest that each sees slavery as resisting semantic containment. Faulkner's novel is told from the "White" perspective, and the unspeakability inherent in his excess of clauses and punctuation (making the past exist within the present) speaks to the White (and Southern) anxiety about the inability to escape the history of slavery. This is a national anxiety too traumatizing for White articulation. In this way, Faulkner is a historical precursor to Morrison, and can be seen as a key influence on her novel and her narrative mode, precisely because his focus is the "White" story. For the Black characters in *Beloved*, it is not necessarily that truths are too traumatizing to access at all, but that the text either refuses to access them in ways that conform to imperialist discourse, or recognizes that the experiences themselves lie outside of linguistic explanation, but not outside of understanding in other ways. Faulkner's text seems to recognize that there is too much to say, but tries to say it all anyway. Morrison's novel, however, in addition to the recognition that words are universally insufficient to contain human experience, also notes the insufficiency of traditional White language in particular to contain experience that is distinctly Black. *Beloved* consciously articulates a particular "Black" narrative that both critiques and extends the White gothic project to which Faulkner contributes.

Presenting my work at the symposium allowed me to practice articulating and explaining my argument to people both inside and outside of my academic discipline. This kind of presentation helped me to solidify my own understanding of my argument, and to identify weak spots that I would like to focus on as I continue to write my Honors thesis on this topic. I received many questions that forced me to consider aspects of my argument that I had sidelined before, and after the symposium I have decided to dedicate a significant amount of time to some of these aspects. One of the questions I plan to tackle this semester while working on my thesis is the question of intentionality of the author. I have been working with a few different kinds of inexpressibility—one in which the unspeakable seems to hauntingly irrupt within the text almost outside of the author's control, and one in which the inexpressibility in the text seems to be consciously and deliberately placed there by the author. My questions now are: *What can I discover about the intentionality of unspeakability in my texts? Does intentionality matter in the context of the unspeakable? How is intentionality or non-intentionality manifested stylistically? What are the different implications of these findings?* These are the kinds of challenging and important questions that the symposium encouraged me to confront. The experience of presenting my research was very helpful in extending my understanding of my argument, and elaborating on my plan for the further development of my senior thesis.

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