



**The Enigmatic Lineaments betwixt  
Life and Death:  
Posttraumatic Growth in Thomas  
Pierce's *The Afterlives* (2018)**

**By**

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**Abstract:**

Thomas Pierce's poignant debut novel *The Afterlives* (2018) premises that God sometimes reincarnates someone in order to give them a second chance – a second chance to ponder life, explore and connect with other people, and question why they exist. The novel tells the story of every man Jim Byrd, a loan officer who suffers a heart attack at age thirty-three. During his fatal cardiac arrest, Jim sees neither tunnels nor white lights — thus begins his journey of exploring and delving into the unknown. Jim's near-death experience allows him to sense the existence of the paranormal, such as ghosts and messages from the afterlife. This study analyses Jim's near-death experience and its after-effects via the five factors of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI). The inventory is a measuring scale of how successful traumatised persons cope with their crisis. The aim of applying this scale is to estimate the positive outcomes of Jim's involvement in trauma and question whether Jim was able to understand the true meaning of life and death.

**Keywords:** *The Afterlives*, Thomas Pierce, near-death experience, PTGI, life, death, ghosts

**ملخص:**

السمات المبهمة بين الحياة والموت: تطور ما بعد الصدمة في رواية الكاتب توماس بيرس "الآخرة"

تركز رواية الكاتب توماس بيرس الأولى والمثيرة للمشاعر - "الآخرة" - على الافتراض بأن الله يختار أن ينقذ شخص ما من موت مؤكد لكي يعطيه فرصة ثانية، تلك الفرصة تجعله يعتبر ويعيد استكشاف الكون من حوله وهذا يؤدي تدريجياً إلى اندماجه مع من حوله. مع الوقت تطرح الأسئلة نفسها في داخله، أسئلة مضمونها يتمركز حول تلك الفرصة الثانية وأسبابها بل تمتد إلى سبب وجوده. وهذا ما حدث لجيم بطل رواية بيرس والذي تتنابه أزمة قلبية مفاجئة في عمر الثالثة والثلاثين، وخلال فترة توقف قلبه لم يرَ جيم أية أنفاق أو أضواء بيضاء ولكن بعد فترة ليست بقصيرة شعر بوجود ما يسمى بالخوراق مثل الأشباح ومن هنا قرر جيم الخوض في المجهول لتفسير ما يمر به.

تحلل هذه الدراسة تجربة الاقتراب من الموت التي مر بها جيم وعواقبها من خلال استخدام العوامل الخمسة لكشف ما يمر به الإنسان بعد الصدمة من تطور، وتعد تلك العوامل مقياساً لكيفية نجاح الأشخاص في مواجهة الصدمات حيث تهدف هذه العوامل إلى تقدير النتائج الإيجابية لصدمة جيم من جراء انغماسه فيها وهذا لكشف ما إذا كان جيم قد تغير حاله للأفضل بعد الصدمة أم لا.

## 1. Introduction

What we are today is the result of an accumulation of past experiences – i.e., being acquainted with many failures and successes is what shapes each one of us and allows one to have a unique personality. Each of such experiences adds new zest to our own lives and helps us understand the reality behind our existence. One of the most powerful life-changing experiences is the life-threatening kind. Such experience leaves the victims traumatised and in search for more information about the mysteries of life and death. Many of the people who go through such distress turn out to question the importance of their survival. Apart from this, they question where their souls would go after death, the reality of hell and heaven, and the possibility of living after death.

Historically, human communities have seemed to adopt beliefs about life after death to bind them and confront mortality. Some scholars have argued that belief in an afterlife is “the handiwork of evolution selection, or by-products of various evolved psychological capacities” (Stewart-Williams xiv). Some of these beliefs argue that the dead haunt the Earth as ghosts or go to an afterlife, and others argue that the souls of the dead pass into new bodies and are born again on Earth (George 4). These

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beliefs create conceptual space for boundary regions between life and death that allow some people to see deceased ancestors, family members, or friends when they come close to death.

Reincarnation is widely known in Eastern philosophy, but its origins in Western thought come from the fourth-century BC Greek philosopher Plato. Plato ended his famous *Republic* with the Myth of Er, which describes neither heaven nor hell but “an ambiguous transitional state between lives where all is given over to free choice, chance, carelessness and oblivion” (Gonzalez 259). Thus, it argues that the soul or essence of a human being is endlessly reincarnated after their death. Such beliefs suggest that “we are reincarnated and that the life we have led in the here and now determines the sort of life we are likely to choose when time comes for us to re-enter life in a new form” (Allen 7). Notably, Plato – who is thought by many to be the godfather of Western thought, which emphasises rationality – believed in an afterlife.

The fact that there is no scientific support for life after death gives the afterlife greater interest as a subject for artists' speculation. Philosophers, poets, writers, and artists of all kinds have endeavoured to represent and reflect on the profound truth that “the most obvious thing about death is that it is ultimately unknowable” (James 9). Thus, Freud argued that death and the

afterlife haunt the imagination of thinkers and artists because of some “primitive instinct” (Ogden 87) that explains “the regulation of several psychic functions” (Carel 3). Following Freud, many researchers and artists have connected belief in the afterlife with how people receive the idea of an afterlife – i.e., the relationship between cognition regarding death and people’s concepts of death. This relationship explains why canonical Western artists’ and thinkers’ musings on the various routes to and characteristics of the afterlife have driven art for centuries. For instance, the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch’s famous panels *Visions of Hereafter* portray “epiphany, that is, the appearance of a deity, or a glimpse of the afterworld” (Engmann 5).

No less an artist than William Shakespeare relied heavily on ghosts in many of his most famous plays. For instance, Banquo’s ghost in *Macbeth* foreshadows the role that Macbeth’s guilt will play in his downfall, and the appearance of the spectral king in *Hamlet* drives home the theme of revenge. Shakespeare and other artists wrestled with the question of “whether a resurrected replica would really be the same person as the one who had died” (Augustine 9). Hundreds of years after Shakespeare’s death, in the twenty-first century, the American

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author Thomas Pierce, in his novel *The Afterlives*, tries to give his audience an imaginary embodiment of what life after death may look like. This endeavour is done by depicting a near-death trauma that results in creating intellectual exemplifications amalgamating past with current events to give a vivid picture of an imagined future.

To explore how questions of the afterlife that result from a near-death experience might change a person's life and make him more anxious to know about the truth of death and life, the researcher applies the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) which is "an instrument for assessing positive outcomes reported by persons who have experienced traumatic events" (Tedeschi and Calhoun 455). The inventory was first introduced by Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi in 1995. This scale is not designed to study the negative impact of trauma but rather its positive effects. In short, this paper uses PTGI as a framework to show the fictional depiction of a near-death experience to trace the elements of self-improvement as reflected in Thomas Pierce's novel *The Afterlives* to verify the possibility that trauma may affect the victim in a constructive way.

## 2. Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI)

Trauma can be defined as “the antithesis of empowerment” since it is a sentimental response to a situation or incident that “stuns us like a bolt out of the blue; it overwhelms us, leaving us altered and disconnected from our bodies” (Levine 4). In 1995, the two psychologists Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi argued that most psychological and social research that dealt with trauma focused on the many negative sides of trauma, like shock, confusion, shame, self-blame, and anger. As a result, “there has been much less attention to the possibility of positive impact of negative events.” Thus, they introduced the term posttraumatic growth (PTG) to study traumatic “events as an experience with some meaning and benefit” to “further our understanding of the natural processes people use as they struggle with the aftermath of trauma to derive meaning, feel wiser, and face uncertain futures with more confidence” (Tedeschi and Calhoun 469). One has to say that their idea was true as “[l]ongitudinal research indicates that the phenomenon is fairly common, with 58 – 83 % of survivors reporting positive change in at least some domains of their lives” (Jayawickreme and Blackie 2). Of course, such positive changes do not appear immediately after the trauma since the victim must suffer, first,



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from many negative effects and then, after a while, and after many trials of coping with his new situation, he develops positive changes. This is what is meant by posttraumatic growth.

A definition for the term posttraumatic growth is given by Eranda Jaya Jayawickreme and Laura E. R. Blackie, “Posttraumatic growth is explicitly a theory of personality change – it proposes that the struggle with adversity can result in genuine and meaningful changes to the individual’s identity and outlook on life” (8). They add that the term answers questions like, “Is ill-being the only outcome we can expect following tragedy? Can enduring significant failure and adversity in fact change your character in truly meaningful ways?” (1) This means that this framework focuses on the relation “between posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic growth: how personality influences the cycle of appraisal, emotional states, and coping (that constitutes the posttraumatic stress reactions), which in turn influences personality (that constitutes posttraumatic growth)” (Joseph and Linely 11). This is in order to prove that “[g]rowth does not occur as a result of trauma. Rather, it is the individual’s struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of trauma that is crucial in determining whether posttraumatic growth occurs” (Ruglass 224). In sum, the PTG argues that distress changes

people; it enables them to discover sides that they never see in themselves before, do things they never think they have the power to do before, and rearrange their priorities in life.

The idea that difficulties empower people is not new. In fact, “almost all major philosophical and religious traditions have argued that experiencing some adversity is an important catalyst for the full development of one’s character” (Jayawickreme and Blackie 7). For example, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the famous German philosopher Nietzsche argued that what does not kill us makes us stronger. Moreover, many theories, like Crisis theory and Existential theory, tried to shed light on the positive effects of trauma. Still, the posttraumatic growth theory remains “the most widely recognized and researched model of growth in the literature” because it suggests “a *radical* reconstruction of a person’s life as a result of rebuilding assumptions that are shattered by trauma” (Werdel and Rabino13). Also, this theory merges elements from psychology and sociology “to impede or promote cognitive-emotional processing” (Joseph and Linely 10).

Another significant factor that characterises the posttraumatic growth theory is the presence of a scale that measures the growth of the traumatised person, the posttraumatic growth inventory (PTGI). The scale consists of twenty-one

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questions organized under five factors or domains. The five domains are: **relating to others** (measures how traumatised persons can count on others and accept them), **spiritual change** (measures spiritual transformations after trauma), **new possibilities** (measures how a traumatised person develops new perspectives in his life by adopting new interests), **personal strength** (measures how traumatised persons endure difficulties), and

**appreciation of life** (measures the amount of appreciation for one's existence after facing a traumatic event) (Tedeschi and Calhoun 460). In the following sections, this paper will discuss, first, the traumatic event in *The Afterlives* and the negative effects resulting from this trauma. After that, the five domains of the PTGI will be applied to depict the presence of any positive changes to determine whether posttraumatic growth takes place or not.

### 3. Near-Death Experience in *The Afterlives*

When a traumatic event happens, it leaves the victim in a state of shock that may lead to many negative effects. The trauma in this novel is the near-death experience that the hero, and narrator, undergoes. The term near-death experience (NDE) was coined by Raymond Moody to refer to the experience of patients who return to life after being clinically dead for a few minutes. The term therefore “suggests knowledge of one’s own existence at the dividing line between life and death” (Engmann 1). Pin van Lommel defines an NDE as “the reported memory of a range of impressions during a special state of consciousness, including several unique elements such as an out-of-body experience, pleasant feelings, seeing a tunnel, a light, deceased relatives, or a life reverie, and a conscious return into the body” (39). John Hogan gives us further insight into the nature of NDEs:

As our medical and surgical skills increase, we can bring back patients who have travelled further on the path to death than at any other time in history. Their recollections often refute physicians’ scientific explanation of how an oxygen-starved brain can produce such intense, vivid, and often corroborated veridical recollections. ...[NDEs] are often life - changing for those people who have them. (3)

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In the novel, NDE occurs to the main character, Jim Byrd, who is a 33-year-old asocial banker living alone in a small apartment in Shula, North Carolina. Jim narrates how he died for not more than 15 minutes and then returned to life. Jim's narration stresses that his near-death experience has completely changed his life. Jim and other characters' reactions to his NDE occur across a spectrum. These begin with medical musings and eventually blend with Byrd's own sensations. On the novel's first page, for instance, when a nurse tells Jim that he was momentarily dead, they both become uncomfortable: "The nurse blushed. To have mentioned the fact of my death, I gathered, had been a slipup. She backtracked: Not an actual death, more like a figurative one, or, rather, a technical one. An almost-death" (1). Jim's cardiologist goes further:

Dying, he clarified, was a process, not a single event. It was like a wave pulling back from the shore, the sand shifting color, dark to light, as the water leached out of it. Even when the sand appeared dry, sometimes you could dig down a few inches and find more water. You died, and then you died little more, and then just a little more until you were all the way completely dead – or not, depending. (4)

Jim is clearly confused and shaken by his NDE, and this allows the reader to ask about the reasons behind Jim's confusion. Thus, one can argue that Pierce succeeds in attracting his reader's attention in a way that "is largely dependent on (although not fully determined by) the configuration of exchange between mind-reader and mind-writer" (Witz 87) by narrating Jim's various feelings in detail. Such details push the reader to ask several questions: are we going to suffer while dying? Where do our souls go after we die? What do we feel while dying? Are we going to face a different kind of existence?

Obviously, Jim's perplexity results from the fact that he feels guilt; Jim feels guilt about his seemingly bland NDE. Usually, people describe their NDEs as "ineffable and indescribable; words are inadequate. They say that in the bright light they feel comfort, joy, peace, and love so intense as to be almost palpable" (Moody 'Near-Death' 13). They often

meet with deceased loved one, friends, and relatives who welcomes them. They have a life review in which they come to understand the meaning of their lives and how they have lived it and how it affected others. They never wish to leave this unity with the light source of love. They return to mortal life reluctantly to help those

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needing them on Earth or sometimes involuntarily because they hear 'your time has not yet come'. Upon returning to their Earthly body, most live a more purposeful, love-filled life. Thereafter the fear of death is generally absent. (Hogan 4 –5)

By contrast, Jim's NDE is blank: "While I was dead, I saw nothing. No lights, no tunnels, no angles. I was just gone. I don't remember anything" (5). This reaction makes him feel guilty – a feeling which begins to seep into his dreams:

Fear and wonder about sums it up for me these days', I said. 'Last night I had this dream where I couldn't find any pencils for a test, but this morning I heard a report in the news about a man who walked into a movie theatre, scooped out his eyeballs with a spoon, and threw them at the audience. Most people thought it was part of the movie. So you can understand if I get my nights and days confused sometimes. Nothing adds up. Sometimes I feel like maybe I've had a brain injury and didn't realize it. (42)

These feelings of guilt are normal, since any NDE brings up existential questions related to "clinical medicine, philosophy, religious studies, and the neurosciences in equal measure" (Moody Forward ix). These aspects of NDEs "present us with

data that are difficult to explain by current physiological and psychological models or by cultural or religious expectations” (Greyson 26). Jim is driven partly mad by his NDE – he feels that he is somehow not a good person because he did not receive a typical NDE. However, NDEs are unique to everyone:

Not everyone who recovers from a dear-death event reports a near-death experience. Nor does everyone who has a near-death experience report the whole, prototypical series of events. Some recall only a brief out-of-body experience with a view of their own physical body below, followed by a quick return. Others get only as far as the dark passageway, while others proceed all the way into the light. We do not know the reasons for all these variations. (Moody ‘Near-Death’ 14)

It is evident now that the first impact of Jim’s trauma is undergoing negative feelings, whether it is fear, guilt, or anger. Such feelings are expected immediately after a traumatic event since it comes without any preparation. After a while, the victims of trauma will develop many other feelings and change in behavior to cope with their new state. Jim, as a trauma victim, will undergo many changes. The next section will examine such changes in order to determine how far Jim’s growth process takes place.



#### **4. Applying PTGI in *The Afterlives***

##### **4.1 . Relating to Others**

This factor measures how traumatised people change to persons who are more willing to count on others to overcome their distress. Thus, they may become closer to certain people who they used to ignore in the past; they may also start feeling compassion for others. As for Jim, he becomes both closer to his loved ones and more interested in what they have to say about his NDE. Consequently, his Christian mother says that “we all fall into some sort of deep sleep when we die, a thoughtless coma, and we only wake up when Jesus returns us to judge the living” (20). Annie, a widow and later Jim’s wife, suggests that “from now on, when people ask you about this, I think you should lie. Just tell them it was all unicorns and cotton candy on the other side” (21). Here, Jim’s brain seeks narratives of his death in ways that allow him to reject his former isolation and share his feelings and experiences with his family, something that he never does. This alteration enables the reader to realize that Jim was given a chance to live a better life; a life that is different than the one he used to live.

Furthermore, his near-death experience brings Jim closer to his father, who he has not spoken to for years on account of

their differing religious opinions. He tells his father about a study of Tibetan monks which proves that their brains stopped while they were praying: “When they experienced that wonderful feeling of oneness with the universe, the brain was no longer working quite so hard to construct a meaningful series of events from the slop of our nonstop experience” (64). This experience leads his father to voice his opinions on the existence of ghosts:

Ghosts is just a word we use to explain something we don't understand ... What we called ghosts were perhaps glimpses from some other, overlapping dimension, one that we'd one day be able to observe with the proper instruments. Or, possibly, we had conjured the so-called ghosts ourselves, collectively; we were capable, in other words, of somehow externalizing our thoughts, projecting them into what he called a psychic space, and these projections could sometimes be felt or heard without our more traditional sense perception. An alternative but related explanation: Ghosts were fractions of personalities, little pieces that had splintered away from a consciousness as pockets of energy. Like little volcanic eruptions of the mind that left invisible lava trails. (70)

He goes on further, rejecting the idea that Jim died at all just because his brain stopped working: “if you'd died, *really* died, then you'd be dead, permanently, you'd be in the ground

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right now ... So, you cannot sit there and tell me you died. I reject the premise of what you have said” (71). However, this puts him in a reflective mood, and he describes a ghost encounter he once had:

I was standing there, my eyes, and I felt something grab hold of me. There was a little pop. Like a champagne cork. A change in pressure. I could hardly breathe. I was still on the stairs, but the stairs were different now. They kept going, in both directions, up and down, forever. Infinitely! I had the strangest sense that I'd always been on those stairs. Some part of me had. Since the beginning of time, maybe. I couldn't decide if this was bad or good. It just *was*. (76)

This conversation proves that Jim changes to a person who is willing to listen to other opinions and opens Jim up to a belief in ghosts, and he sought further information about ghosts and the potentialities of the afterlife. Here, both Jim and the reader effectively become readers, as they both seek to receive and believe additional information about the secrets of the universe. They start asking themselves about the existence of ghosts and about their nature. Moreover, they discover how wonderful people can be and they accept the fact that they need others.

## 4.2. Spiritual Change

One of the most significant positive changes that occurs to traumatised persons is adopting stronger religious faith and better understanding of spiritual matters. This change is clear regarding Jim's case. Even though he doubts his Christian faith because he finds himself "unable to confirm the existence of heaven" (20), he considers his NDE a "wake-up call" and seeks refuge and closure from his NDE in church. His NDE leads him to think that God does not love him or that he is a neglectful or deficient Christian. While in church, he becomes critical of his fellow churchgoers, suggesting that church is "net for sceptics and wannabe born-again, for Jimmy Carters of the digital age, for people who wanted to *feel* God but didn't know how anymore" (47). This dissociation leads him to feel as if he had "wandered into somebody's else's dream" (56). Some of his peers who have not had an NDE, such as Sudeepa, seek to conquer life – they believe that people will live forever with the help of future pharmaceuticals and medical advances: "Just around the corner is immortality. Even one of us, if we hang on long enough, will live forever" (58). Others, like Wes, think that people can live forever "if they take care and avoid cholesterol and saturated fats, if they stay fit, if they keep off the roads as much as possible" (59).

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According to both characters, knowledge is the key to immortality. Here, Wes describes his view of the Weeza virus, which results from tick bites and melts one's insides:

Weeza was always there ... We just didn't realize it. Everything you fear – the viruses, the violence – we've always been living with it, in some form. What's changed is that today we're just more aware. It only seems like there's more to fear because we've been so successful at identifying all the various threats. (58)

Such narratives change Jim from an unfriendly person to one willing to have friends. He has both the patience and interest to listen to many stories that are being narrated inside the church. These stories will enable the reader to ask himself about his existence and the meaning of his life.

In sum, Jim's NDE leads him to believe that he was "given a second chance" and that he "needed to take advantage" (6). Thereofre, he becomes obsessed with his health, which changes his cognition about himself and his life. For instance, when talking to Annie about his NDE, he makes what is (for him) an essential distinction between a heart attack and cardiac arrest:

“Not a heart attack, I corrected her, but cardiac arrest. ...Heart attacks were what killed old fat men who’d been eating cheeseburgers and fried chicken all their lives. Cardiac arrest could kill anybody at any time – even strong, able-bodied men such as myself” (18). He also becomes obsessed with checking his heart’s health – and reflecting on his inevitable mortality – through an application on his smartphone:

I got out my phone and tapped on the screen. My heart blossomed into digital view. I’m not sure why, but I found it soothing to be able to look at it whenever I pleased. Sometimes, when I had troubled falling asleep at night, I’d turn up the volume and listen to my heart beating ... As long as I could hear my heart, I was still alive. I was still here. This – the possibility that, at any moment, I would cease to be here – was what made it so difficult to fall asleep. (19)

These excerpts from the novel show that NDEs dramatically affect sufferers’ cognition, and lead Jim to change the kind of person he is – his interests, priorities, relationships, and his values.

### **4.3. New Possibilities**

The traumatised person may develop new interests and develops better understanding of his life. He might establish a new path for life and try to change things that need changing. Jim's NDE leads him to change his cognitive habits about death and the afterlife. For instance, he believes Ruth, a restaurant owner, when she tells him that something strange is happening in her restaurant and that her staff are encountering ghosts:

Another night, another server. A young guy. He was coming down the stairs, drying his hands with a towel, when he burst into tears. A volcano of wailing and crying. The poor guy couldn't control himself. The other servers ragged him into Ruth's office, out of sight, and had to physically restrain him. Once they managed to calm him down, however, the guy was unable to tell them what had triggered it. It was inexplicable. (28)

Jim responds by thinking that "Clearly the stairs were haunted. She was going to have to wall them off entirely. She wasn't the sort of person who believed in ghosts, but whatever was happening, it was real" (29). This stands in stark contrast to Jim's father's original stance, which rejects ghosts' existence. By juxtaposing Jim and his father this way, Pierce shows how NDEs

can change people's (and perhaps readers') receptivity to narratives about ghosts or the afterlife.

Lisa Kröger and Melanie Anderson suggest that ghosts lie between fact and fiction since they “have long been considered denizens of the shadows, the areas “betwixt and between”” – they “inhabit a realm between the physical and the spiritual – caught between this reality and the next ones” (ix). Jim's NDE leads him to reflect that:

[i]f ghosts truly existed, then surely we were surrounded on all sides? By my calculations, the earth contained roughly 197 million square miles of surface area (land and water), and according to various population studies, 108 billion humans had lived and died on the planet. That meant that for every square mile, there had been roughly 548 deaths in our not terribly long history as a species. Even if we assumed only twenty percent of those who'd died remained as a ghost, that still would have left more than a hundred ghosts per square mile, not to mention the fact that we don't live all over the world but in pockets, here and there. (60)

Ghosts populate the novel in a similar way. Pierce narrates the story of the first owner of the house that now contains Ruth's restaurant, who died in a house fire, between each section of the



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novel proper. These vignettes are presented in short sentences and a straight, factual style. They also weave in and out of the novel proper, as when Ruth talks about how she invited the physicist Sally Zinker to examine the house and make recordings, checking for supernatural activity. In these recordings, she can hear a woman screaming “The dog’s on fire” (31), indicating that, at least in Pierce’s mind, ghosts really do exist.

When Jim delves deeper into the unknown, he becomes interested in Zinker’s idea of partial existence and contacts her to understand it better. She argues that “you only ninety-three percent existed” (126) and that the remaining seven percent of us that is elsewhere enables human beings “to converse with the dead” (129). Moreover, Zinker believes that dead people are not dead in the sense of being irrevocably gone or not-here, but that they are instead “loosed from materiality and therefore time and space’ and ‘returned to a dimension of pure thought and intension, a dimension that ... [is] entirely off-limits to us” (129). Thus, she concludes that the word ‘ghost’ is not accurate, since it connotes fictional representations of the dead who are no longer with us; instead, she asks people to adopt a position of radical doubt:

She wanted to believe that the universe was not just a happy (or not so happy, depending) mistake, that we weren't just little bits of life dinging to a rock in the middle of a mostly dead galaxy. She wasn't looking for God necessarily. She was just searching for indication that life did not end with the physical body, that consciousness might, in some form, survive the body's death. (127)

Zinker narrates several different ways of thinking about death and the afterlife. One of these is the tale of two hands clapping:

Two hands clapped and made a noise. Both hands rejoiced. The noise was such that the clap had seemingly proved, once and for all, the existence of either hand. Flesh had met flesh. Skin, skin. Cells, cells. The slap had even stung a bit. The two hands were very happy with the outcome of their clapping experiment. The two hands were very happy with the outcome of their clapping experiment. They congratulated each other with more and more rigorous clapping and even a little bit of waving and thumbs-up. Hurrah! The Right Hand shouted. We're here! We really do exist! (125)

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These stories allow Jim to think of his existence and the reason behind it. The story of the two hands clapped makes the reader's brain think of touching and how touching is one way to prove that you are alive; that you are not living a dream; that you are really at the place that your eyes see. Thus, Jim starts asking himself questions, such as:

What if, fundamentally, I simply wasn't a good enough person to deserve an afterlife? What if some people have no soul, and I was one of them? What if I had seen no afterlife because I didn't have the will or ability to believe in one? These were the questions that kept me awake some nights. I didn't want to die again; I didn't want to disappear! (134)

However, in delving deeper into the unknown, Jim confronts the reality that there is no single, authentic way to describe, explain, or understand death, dying, and NDEs. In wondering whether or not there is "indeed a part of us that conquers death and continues to live a different kind of existence where it has new powers and undergoes unfamiliar experiences" (Masúmián x), Jim is experiencing a sense of loss for his belief in the afterlife – a belief which "give[s] believers confidence and purpose"

(Stewart-Williams xviii).

Jim's new possibilities prove that he is in a state of insecurity. He finds himself unable to explain or truly believe most of the stories about the afterlife that he comes across. Here too he seeks comfort in his father, who is sure that "[e]verything has an explanation. What I mean is, there's nothing we're not willing to come up with an explanation for. Anything miraculous or amazing that happens to us in life, our brains are trained to pick it apart. To be sceptical" (176). Jim has proven that death is the most successful creator of literature, since it is the most important and mysterious secret in our life. Moreover, our yearning to know more about our existence represents our yearning to understand our life, our purpose, and our relationship with others. The more Jim understands this, the more his growing process becomes successful.

#### **4.4 . Personal Strength**

This domain measures how distressed persons find several methods to overcome their own difficulties and accept the way things work. Thus, they realise that they are stronger than they ever thought. This is clear in Jim's case as his narration regarding death continue to change throughout the final parts of the book.

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When Jim's father dies, he becomes even more interested in various theories regarding the afterlife. He becomes attracted to Zinker's daisy theory – "this idea in physics that not everything exists equally or uniformly. For instance, there's a chance you could exist a little bit more than me. Or me more than you" (210). This interest leads him to seek out Claude Wilkes-Weaver, a psychic and medium. Claude gives him a phone number and claims that it is a message from his father. It turns out to be Zinker's number. Therefore, Jim believes that his father is pushing him toward Zinker's theories as a way to understand and come to peace with his death. However, this is a selfish pursuit for Jim, who tells Zinker that "I want to reach my father. Or God. Or anyone, for that matter. I just want to know if this is it. if I'm going to disappear when I die" (252). Here, Jim's confusion and desperation have him seeking any kind of answer or experience which will verify, in his eyes, that there is indeed an afterlife.

This desperation sparks Jim's belief and interest in Zinker's so-called reunion machine, which she claims will allow the living to visit the afterlife. Her sponsor, Martin Strider, claims that "this machine is going to change the world. It's going to totally transform it. Not only will we get to talk to the dead, we'll know for sure that death isn't the end. And if we do that,

what will be left to fear? Mark my words, this is the beginning of a huge change in our evolution” (282). Jim becomes ever more convinced of the reality of an afterlife when he hears Willa’s story. Willa came to Zinker to see her sister, who died three years before. When Jim asks her if her sister knows she is dead, she answers, “It wasn’t like that. Dead or alive, that didn’t really enter into it. We were just together again” (297). This incident enables the reader to think that the machine is real and that it does work. More importantly, it pushes the reader to think of the afterlife and whether we will be able to remember our old lives.

Zinker advises Jim not to try the reunion machine because of his heart condition. Annie tries the machine instead in order to meet her deceased husband. Afterward, she recalls her experience in a way that echoes Willa’s experience: “I just don’t know how to describe it. It was nothing at all like what I expected. I was all over, bouncing around. But then, eventually, I found myself back in my old apartment, the one in Charleston, just sort of lounging around and then in walks Ansy with a couple of his friends, and it was just like it used to be” (303). Annie’s recollection makes Jim think that using the reunion machine to see his father might be worth the risk, so he tries it for “a fraction of a fraction of a second” (318). While in the machine, Jim sees his father and is

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not aware of his father's death: "I began to panic. My life as Jim Byrd felt remote – even unlikely. It was something that had happened once, thousands of years ago, something I could hardly remember anymore, something that possibly had been a story I'd told myself. I'd made up Jim Byrd. How ludicrous that I'd ever been such a thing as him" (312–313). He also sees Clara Lennox, the original inhabitant of what is now Ruth's restaurant, and her dog. Jim is seated on the stairs of Ruth's restaurant with his father, feeling as though they had been there forever. When he tries to touch his father, he vanishes. Jim pursues him up the stairs: "I climbed. Up and up. I must have climbed for several years. I kept going and going. The stairs in the restaurant, they're winding stairs, if you remember, and without any walls or floors, any point of reference" (321).

Jim glimpses his future in the reunion machine. He sees that he and Annie will have a son together, that Annie will die, and that he will remarry. He and Annie do indeed have a child, William, but Jim's glimpse of the future in the reunion machine makes him miserable and uncomfortable: "my son's precious breath was a reminder of Annie's fate and of the fact that I'd kept a secret from her. The guilt was overwhelming" (325). Here, Pierce is playing with the idea of forbidden knowledge to

perhaps underline all he has said about death and the afterlife in the novel – some things are better unknown. This is clear in the way that Strider destroys the machine after Zinker's death, saying that "the machine was just too dangerous, and that's the God honest truth. No way we ever could have marketed that thing" (359). But one has to say that trying the machine with his heart condition proved that Jim has changed to a person who can overcome his fears. He finds in himself the strength to undergo an experience that may harm him without hesitation.

#### **4.5. Appreciation of Life**

In this stage traumatised people start appreciating what they have in life, appreciating their existence. The novel's end is a prove that Jim has changed to a person who appreciates what he has now. The novel ends with Jim standing at the original site of Ruth's restaurant, which has since been razed. He stands in the place where the stairs used to be. Annie is standing behind him, but he does not notice her existence:

Then, warm and firm, her hand at my neck: I could feel the contact of each finger, the bulb of her thumb, a nail's hard edge. Next, the heat of her voice in my ears: What was I doing down here?



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Wasn't I really to go home? Already my heart was sliding back into an even beat I was going to be all right. I opened my eyes, and, thank God, there she was. (366)

It is clear now that the novel suggests that “life and death offer us the opportunity to tell stories, which, however, often contain an element of illusion precisely owing to their narrative character, which perhaps sometimes makes more sense than the banality of life and its ending does” (Hakola and Kivistö viii). It also proves that “human beings struggle with the concept of death, the final mystery of life, and traditionally avoid any discussion that deal with death-related topics and concerns” (Crosetto and Garcha xv). All in all, this ending argues that it is better for Jim not to think of the machine anymore or what he saw there. Knowing the future makes Jim live an unhealthy life full of fear; fear of losing someone that he loves; fear of being a single father; fear of not being able to be happy again the way he is now with his wife and son.

## 5. Conclusion

*The Afterlives* elegantly sheds light on the biggest mystery of life – death. Throughout the novel, the American Author Thomas Pierce gives us many ideas and speculations about what humans may undergo or feel after death. These are offered by various persons such as devout persons, nonbelievers, scientists, and fortune-tellers. Such speculations are offered as a part of Jim Byrd's journey to search for the truth after facing trauma, a near-death experience. At first, Jim's NDE makes him more sensitive to the paranormal. This heightened perception leads Jim to question suffering, loss, pain, death, time, and even love through a humorous and puzzling narrative. After that, Jim is able to gain self-confidence when he becomes closer to people, like his parents. He discovered that during his distress, they offered him great support. Besides, he marries and takes many friends. Thereofre, he changes from an asocial person to a social one. Jim also finds new perspectives and interests in life and thus becomes able to arrange his priorities. This transformation enables Jim to find his own strength which will lead him to appreciate what he has in life. Such changes are clear after applying posttraumatic growth inventory to Jim's narration of life, death, and what lies between. The PTGI makes it perspicuous that trauma, as Pierce stresses, affets how people can confront their fears and

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obstacles. It also sheds light on the growth that happens to Jim after his trauma recovery, which enables him to gain control over his life.

Briefly, Jim's narration to his NDE allows the reader to understand that he is finally able to deduce that God chooses to keep some aspects of life and death a mystery in order to give us the chance to explore his creation and keep us anxious to meet Him – that not-knowing is not only vital to the experience and wonder of life, but that it adds pleasure to our lives. In conclusion, this novel attempts to understand how a cognitive process of a traumatic event supports a narrative understanding that allows readers to create conceptual patterns of the world, which in this novel is the fine mysterious line between life and death.

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