

Mexican Gothic Lesson Plan

Introduction to the Gothic
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Overview: This lesson serves as an introduction to the Gothic genre. In particular, it explores how the novel situates Gothic genre conventions within a Mexican literary and geographical landscape, as well as how it expresses its self-awareness of that genre. The lesson covers content from the first six chapters of the novel. For this reason, this lesson is best suited for the first day of discussing the novel, as it will lay important generic groundwork for subsequent discussions of the novel.

This lesson has been adapted from the “Introduction to Genre Fiction” exercise included in Diana Fuss and William A. Gleason’s *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 exercises for the college classroom* (Fuss and Gleason 199-201). For a useful resource on the Gothic genre as it might pertain to *Mexican Gothic*, see Carmen A. Serrano’s *Gothic Imagination in Latin American Fiction and Film*.

Objectives:

By the end of class, students will be able to:

- Define the Gothic genre and identify genre conventions of the genre
- Identify how *Mexican Gothic* aligns with the Gothic genre
- Discuss and analyze *Mexican Gothic*’s self-awareness of its genre

Class Structure:

15 minutes: Discussion of the Gothic genre

- Develop definition of Gothic genre as a class
 - Ask students to list any genre conventions of the Gothic genre that come to mind. Keep a running list on a whiteboard or PowerPoint.
 - Use the following questions to guide students’ brainstorming: “What elements does a story need to have to be in this genre? What kinds of characters, relationships, or events would you expect to encounter? What kinds of beginnings or endings? What kind of setting or time period? Why? Is there a typical consumer of this genre? If so, who? Why do people who enjoy this genre enjoy it?” (Fuss and Gleason 200). You might also ask students to list any examples of Gothic books and movies that come to mind.
 - Once you have a detailed list, open the floor to debate. Are there any listed genre conventions that students do not agree with? Are there any elements that should be cut from the list? Ask students to defend their answers as they offer their arguments.
 - Ask students to help you draft a brief definition of the Gothic genre based on the list you have created together.

15 minutes: Brief lecture on the genre

- Discuss the different phases of the genre’s development, as well as its primary geographic ties to European and (later) American writers

- First wave (1764-1820): “often takes as its setting castles or ruins in far-off lands and the distant past. The plot frequently focuses on a helpless heroine pursued by a monstrous villain, a scheme meant to evince terror in the character and to provoke it in readers” (Serrano 3); examples: Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*, Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian*
- Second wave (19th century): “literal monsters” in “modern cityscapes” (4); examples: Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*
- Common conventions across the genre:
 - Characters: “a passive and persecuted female, a sensitive and ineffectual hero, and a dynamic and tyrannical villain” (4)
 - Setting: “usually antiquated spaces such as castles, abbeys, vast prisons, subterranean crypts, graveyards, and large old houses” (4)
 - Plot: “often a secret from the past haunts the characters, both psychologically and physically” (5)
 - Themes: “transgressive sexual relations” (5); fear
- Present Carmen A. Serrano’s argument that Latin American writers began using the Gothic genre in the twentieth century to “[give] shape to fears and apprehensions that artists were experiencing at particular social and political junctures” (2)
 - “The evocation of an archaic past—a terrifying one that is feudal, dark, and monstrous—was a way for authors in Spanish-speaking America to express contemporary conflicts, both social conflicts associated with encroaching modernity and conflicts with a colonial legacy; it also reflected the authors’ hesitation in asserting their literary autonomy” (Serrano 6-7). (2)
 - For instance, Silvia Moreno-Garcia uses ghosts and hauntings to give voice to the colonized landscape of rural Mexico: “To know a place, you must look at the land. What the land told me in Hidalgo is that there are ghosts and then there are *ghosts*. The ones that wear bed sheets over their heads are much less terrifying than the ones left by the sins of our ancestors” (Moreno-Garcia, “Book Club Kit” 2).

15 minutes: Small group discussions

- Break students into small groups of 3-4 people and assign one of the previously-discussed genre conventions to each group.
- Have each group complete the following tasks:
 - Identify 1-2 passages in the first 6 chapters in which the assigned convention appears in the novel.
 - As a group, use your selected passages to address the following questions:
 - How does the genre convention appear in the text?
 - How does the novel adapt the genre convention to its literal and/or metaphorical Mexican landscape?
 - Does the novel’s use of that convention instill fear in readers, and if so, how?

30 minutes: Class discussion

- Have students present their group findings. If possible, record the specific ways that the novel expresses Gothic genre conventions alongside the previously generated list of Gothic genre conventions so that students can see the overlap as well as the distinctly “Mexican” expression of such conventions.
- Using the lists you have generated together as a guide, perform close readings on a few passages with the class. The primary questions to be addressed through the discussion include:
 - How is the novel self-aware of its alignment with the Gothic genre? How does the novel guide readers towards an understanding of its connection to the genre? How do the novel’s explicit Gothic genre conventions and its self-awareness of the genre influence readers’ reading process?
 - Passages:
 - The Title: *Mexican Gothic*
 - Pose the following questions to students after you have read this passage together: What sort of story did you expect after reading the title? Why do you think the title was selected for the novel?
 - Pages 34-35: “‘Catalina thinks the candlelight is romantic.’ Noemí supposed she would. It was the kind of thing she could imagine impressing her cousin: an old house atop a hill, with mist and moonlight, like an etching out of a Gothic novel, *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, those were Catalina’s sort of books. Moors and spiderwebs. Castles too, and wicked stepmothers who force princesses to eat poisoned apples, dark fairies cursing maidens and wizards who turn handsome lords into beasts. Noemí preferred to jump from party to party on a weekend and drive a convertible. So maybe, in the end, this house suited Catalina fine. Could it be it had been a bit of a fever?”
 - Pose the following questions to students after you have read this passage together: How does Noemí feel about Catalina’s interest in Gothic novels? How does Noemí’s perception of the Gothic influence her interactions with the people and environment around her?
 - Pg. 49: “‘And you, what have you been up to? Don’t think I haven’t noticed you hardly write. Have you been pretending you live on a windswept manor, like in *Wuthering Heights*?’ Noemí asked. Catalina had worn out the pages of that book. ‘No. It’s the house. The house takes most of my time,’ Catalina said, extending a hand and touching the velvet draperies.”
 - Pose the following questions to students after you have read this passage together: What does Noemí’s question to Catalina suggest about Noemí’s perception of Gothic tales? How does Catalina’s answer suggest the role Gothic conventions play in the novel and/or her own story?

Works Cited

Fuss, Diana, and William A. Gleason, editors. *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 Exercises for the College Classroom*. Princeton UP, 2016.

Moreno-Garcia, Silvia. *Mexican Gothic*. Del Ray, 2020.

Moreno-Garcia, Silvia. "Mexican Gothic Book Club Kit." Random House Books, 2020

Serrano, Carmen A. *Gothic Imagination in Latin American Fiction and Film*. U of New Mexico P, 2019.