

## ***Mexican Gothic Lesson Plan***

### Focalization and Perception within the Gothic

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**Overview:** This lesson serves as an introduction to the literary concept of focalization within the novel. It explores how the narrative restricts itself to Noemí's perspective to reinforce gothic conventions, highlighting shifting perceptions and (mis)interpretations of High Place and its inhabitants. Ultimately, it demonstrates how focalization becomes a critical tool for the novel's attempt to emphasize Noemí's growing wariness of her environment (and her inability to identify the precise source of her wariness) and consequently heightens fear in its readers as well, with Noemí's wariness and readers' fear functioning as key elements of the Gothic genre. For this reason, this lesson is best suited for the second day of discussing the novel, as it will build on the discussion of the Gothic genre while laying additional groundwork for students' understanding of the rest of the novel.

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 the class, students will:

- Define focalization via passage analysis, large group discussion, and lecture
- Analyze how focalization relates to perception/misperception and the Gothic genre via small group and class discussion

### **Class Structure:**

*15 minutes:* Group discussion on focalization

- Close read a passage that introduces readers to High Place through Noemí's internal focalization:
  - Pgs. 20-21: "Then, all of a sudden, they were there, emerging into a clearing, and the house seemed to leap out of the mist to greet them with eager arms. It was so odd! It looked absolutely Victorian in construction, with its broken shingles, elaborate ornamentation, and dirty bay windows. She'd never seen anything like it in real life; it was terribly different from her family's modern house, the apartments of her friends, or the colonial houses with façades of red tezontle. The house loomed over them like a great, quiet gargoyle. It might have been foreboding, evoking images of ghosts and haunted places, if it had not seemed so tired, slats missing from a couple of shutters, the ebony porch groaning as they made their way up the steps to the door, which came complete with a silver knocker like a fist dangling from a circle. *It's the abandoned shell of a snail*, she told herself, and the thought of snails brought her back to her childhood, playing in the courtyard of their house, moving aside the potted plants and seeing the roly-polies scuttle about as they tried to hide again. Or feed sugar cubes to the ants, despite her mother's admonishments. Also, the kind tabby, which slept under the bougainvillea and let itself be petted endlessly by the children. She did not imagine they had a cat in this house, nor canaries chirping merrily in their cages that she might feed in the mornings."

- Pose the following questions: Who is speaking? Who is perceiving? How do we know who is speaking versus perceiving? What does Noemí's interpretation of the house tell us about her? How does Noemí's perception influence readers' interaction with the house?

*15 minutes:* Brief lecture on focalization

- Provide definition of focalization
  - Definition of focalization: “a selection or restriction of narrative information in relation to the experience and knowledge of the narrator, the characters or other, more hypothetical entities in the story's world” ([Living Handbook on Narratology](#)).
    - The manner in which a narrative filters the content readers receive through the perception of a character/characters
    - As needed, discuss an example with students:
      - Contrast “Template” and “Subjective” from [99 Ways to Tell A Story: Exercises in Style](#), paying particular attention to how “Subjective” denies readers certain information based on the perception of the focalizer
  - Identify Noemí as the primary focalizer within the narrative, and use previous passage to demonstrate how focalization works.
    - The narrative filters the story's world largely through Noemí's perspective, which then influences the knowledge about and experience of the house that we have.
    - If students are confused about how focalization works with a third-person narrator, define and offer examples of point of view.
  - Discuss perception/misperception as common tropes in the Gothic genre, which can be explored in *Mexican Gothic* through Noemí as focalizer.

*15 minutes:* Group discussion on focalization

- Break students into small groups of 3-4 people and assign each group one of the following passages:
  - Passages:
    - Pg. 30: “Noemi felt the eyes of all the family members on her. Her presence was a novelty and an alteration to their patterns. An organism introduced into their sterile environment. They waited to hear what she revealed and to analyze her words. Well, let them see that she could keep her cool. She had experience dealing with irritating men. They did not fluster her. She had learned, by navigating cocktail parties and meals at restaurants, that showing any kind of reaction to their crude remarks emboldened them.”
    - Pg. 77: “This was very close to what she'd said, and perhaps if he'd intoned the words with a certain levity it might have been constructed as a joke and Noemí would have clutched his arm for a moment and laughed. ‘Mr. Doyle,’ she would have said, and they would have talked about her father and her mother, and how she was always quarreling with her brother, and her cousins who were numerous and lively. But Howard

Doyle's words were harsh and his eyes had a sickening sort of animation to them. He almost leered at her, one of his thin hands brushing a strand of her hair, as if doing her a kindness—he'd found a bit of lint and tossed it away—but no. No kindness at all as he moved that lock behind her shoulder. He was a tall man even in his old age, and she didn't like looking up at him, she didn't like seeing him bend toward her like that. He looked like a sick insect, an insect hiding under a velvet robe. His lips curved into a smile as he leaned down closer, peering carefully at her."

- Pg. 81: "And she felt such sweet, sickening desire flowing through her body, making her roll her hips, sinuous, a serpent. But it was he who coiled himself around her, swallowed her shuddering sigh with his lips, and she didn't quite want this, not like that, not those fingers digging too firmly into her flesh, and yet it was hard to remember why she hadn't wanted it. She must want this. To be taken, in the dirt, without preamble or apology."
- Pg. 121: "The comment was mildly inappropriate. In the daylight, with other people, it might have been a joke. At night, and the way he said it, it didn't seem at all decent. And yet, though subtly wrong, she found herself unable to reply. *Don't be silly*, she thought to say. Or even, *I don't want your clothes*. But she didn't say a thing, because it wasn't really that bad of a comment, a few words, and she didn't wish to start a fight in the middle of a dark hallway over what amounted to almost, but not quite, nothing. 'Well, good night, then,' he said, unhurriedly releasing the lapel and taking a step back. He held the oil lamp at eye level and smiled at her. Virgil was an attractive man and the smile was a pleasant smile—almost teasing, in a good-humored way—but there was an edge to his expression that the smile could not mask. She did not like it. She was suddenly reminded of her dream, and she thought of the man in the bed holding his arms outstretched, and she thought there was a golden cast in his eyes, a glimmer of gold among the blue. She turned her head abruptly, blinking and staring at the floor."
- Each group should address the following questions about their passage:
  - What is happening in this scene? What is this scene's context?
  - How does the passage's focalization serve to characterize Noemí? What does she perceive, and what does her interpretation of what she sees tell us about her in this moment?

*30 minutes:* Class discussion

- Have each group share their findings, taking notes on their findings based on the chronology of the passages.
- As a group, discuss the following:
  - How do Noemí's perceptions of the house and its inhabitants shift over the course of her time there? What causes these shifts? In what situations does Noemí question her own perceptions?
  - How does the novel's use of Noemí as primary focalizer influence readers' reading process and our understanding of what is happening? What would the

novel look like if it used an alternative character, such as Catalina or Francis, as primary focalizer? Is the use of Noemí as focalizer related to any of the key tropes or conventions of the Gothic genre discussed previously?

Additional passages for group activity (as needed):

- Pg. 46: “In the corner of her room there was a bit of mold upon the wallpaper that caught her eye. She thought of these green wallpapers so beloved by the Victorians that contained arsenic. The so-called Paris and Scheele greens. And wasn’t there something in a book she’d read once about how microscopic fungi could act upon the dyes in the paper and form arsine gas, sickening the people in the room? She was certain she’d heard about how these most civilized Victorians had been killing themselves in this way, the fungi chomping on the paste in the wall, causing unseen chemical reactions. She couldn’t remember the name of the fungus that had been the culprit—Latin names danced at the top of her tongue, *brevicaule*—but she thought she had the facts right. Her grandfather had been a chemist and her father’s business was the production of pigments and dyes, so she knew to mix zinc sulfide and barium sulfate if you wanted to make lithopone and a myriad of other bits of information. Well, the wallpaper was not green. Not even close to green; it was a muted pink, the color of faded roses, with ugly yellow medallions running across it. Medallions or circles; when you looked at it closely you might think they were wreaths. She might have preferred the green wallpaper. This was hideous, and when she closed her eyes, the yellow circles danced behind her eyelids, flickers of color against black.”
- Pg. 103: “She reached the cemetery’s gate soon enough and swung it open. Noemí looked over her shoulder and saw a figure at a distance, Francis with his basket, the curling wisps of mist making his features vague. Yes, he must have been the silhouette she had spied in the cemetery earlier, and yet she felt it couldn’t have been him. *Maybe it was a destroying angel of a different kind*, Noemí mused, and immediately regretted such an odd, morbid thought. Really, what was wrong with her today?”
- Pg. 123: “It’s funny how daylight could change her mind so utterly. At night, after her sleepwalking episode, Noemí had been scared, pulling the covers up to her chin. Contemplating the sky through her window, scratching her left wrist, she found the whole episode embarrassing and prosaic. Her room, when viewed with the curtains wide open and the sun streaming in, was worn and sad, but couldn’t conceal ghosts or monsters. Hauntings and curses, bah!”

## Works Cited

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