

Mexican Gothic Lesson Plan
Gothic Monsters
Created by Erika Gotfredson

Overview: In this lesson, students investigate how monstrosity exemplifies societal concerns and anxieties in the novel. It encourages them to analyze various objects reflecting the Doyles' monstrosity and the family's oppressive relationship with women as well as the surrounding Mexican context. Because this activity considers Noemí's growing understanding of the Doyles' monstrosity, which culminates in her escape from the house, it is best suited for a concluding lesson, so that students can analyze the text in full.

This lesson has been adapted from the "Object Lessons" exercise included in Diana Fuss and William A. Gleason's *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 exercises for the college classroom* (Fuss and Gleason 321-24). 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 monstrosity
- Apply theories of monstrosity to key objects and characters in the novel
- Understand how discourses of monstrosity in the text relate to key topics including gender roles and colonialism

Class Structure:

20 minutes: Class discussion

- Discuss with class how monsters in Gothic literature invoke fear in readers and illuminate present anxieties
 - Definition of monster/monstrosity from Stephen T. Asma's *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*:
 - "The term *monster* is often applied to human beings who have, by their own horrific actions, abdicated their humanity" (7).
 - "One aspect of the monster concept seems to be the breakdown of intelligibility. An action or a person or a thing is monstrous when it can't be processed by our rationality, and also when we cannot readily relate to the emotional range involved. We know what it's like to hate, for example, but when we designate a monstrous hate, we are acknowledging that it is off our chart" (10).
 - "*Monster* derives from the Latin word *monstrum*, which in turn derives from the root *monere* (to warn). To be a monster is to be an omen. Sometimes the monster is a display of God's wrath, a portent of the future, a symbol of moral virtue or vice, or an accident of nature. The monster is more than an odious create of the imagination; it is a kind of *cultural category*, employed in domains as diverse as religion, biology, literature, and politics" (13).
 - Connection of monstrosity to the Gothic genre

- “The addressing of present concerns by conjuring a previous moment in history, so often attributed to the Gothic, mirrors the expression of anxieties associated with the social and political milieu via the vampires, doubles, and live burials of Latin American texts. The texts analyzed here evoke creatures and punishments associated with an illusory bygone time; however, these authors not only summon European Old World castles, labyrinths, and vampires, but they also mention pre-Columbian gods and myths and age-old temples and ruins to create nightmares that speak to the particularities of the region’s history and culture. That is, authors, often double back to both historical settings, adding to the stories’ mystery and wonder and paralleling the way that Gothicists approached their historical past” (Serrano 6-7).
- Ask students to identify monstrous characters in the novel:
 - How does the character function as a monster? What monstrous characteristics does the character have?

30 minutes: Group activity

- Transition into group activity by suggesting to students that Noemí eventually comes to interpret the Doyles as monsters in part through the objects and symbols within their home that signal their consumption: of land and resources, of each other, and of Noemí and Catalina.
- Break students into groups of 3-4 and assign each group one of the following objects: mushrooms, silver, ouroboros.
- Each group should read the key passages associated with their object and answer the following questions:
 - What is Noemí’s initial impression of the object? How does that impression change the longer she stays at High Place?
 - What does the object reveal about the Doyles and their relationship to each other and/or their Mexican neighbors and landscape? How does the object reveal the Doyles’ monstrosity?
- Key passages:
 - Ouroboros: Pgs. 183, 269-70
 - Mushrooms: Pgs. 210-12, 282-83
 - Silver: Pgs. 17-18, 244

25 minutes: Class discussion

- Have each group share their findings and record them on a whiteboard or PowerPoint.
- Perform close readings of the following passage, using these questions to guide the close reading:
 - How does the act of consumption extend to physical bodies in the novel? How does the novel use the concept of consumption to exemplify the Doyles’ monstrosity and to critique their racial, national, and gender privilege?
 - Pg. 269: “A body. That’s what they all were to them. The bodies of miners in the cemetery, the bodies of women who gave birth to their children, and the bodies of those children who were simply the fresh skin of the snake. And there on the bed lay the body that mattered. The father.”

- Potential alternative passage, pg. 284: “All the ghosts were Agnes. Or rather, all the ghosts lived inside Agnes. No, that wasn’t right either. What had once been Agnes had become the gloom, and inside the gloom there lived ghosts. It was maddening. It was not a haunting. It was possession and not even that, but something she couldn’t even begin to describe. The creation of an afterlife, furnished with the marrow and the bones and the neurons of a woman, made of stems and spores.”
- Discuss the novel’s ending in relation to its representation of monstrosity: Is the novel’s conclusion hopeful or haunting? Have all the monsters been eradicated by the novel’s end, or does it leave additional monsters for Noemí and Catalina to face?
 - A quick note: This conversation about the novel’s conclusion could be developed into an entire day’s lesson plan. Consider using the activity “Alternate Endings” in Diana Fuss and William A. Gleason’s *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 Exercises for the College Classroom* as a means to explore and discuss the key issues and themes at play in the novel’s resolution.

Additional passages for group discussion (as needed):

- Ouroboros: Pgs. 38, 87, 209, 244
- Mushrooms: Pgs. 28, 55-57, 97-98, 257
- Silver: Pgs. 41, 44, 112-14, 125-128, 205

Works Cited

Asma, Stephen T. *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*. Oxford UP, 2009.

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