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Configurations of the Monstrous in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic*

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Abstract
Mexican Gothic is a Gothic horror novel that mobilises a wide range of genre conventions to narrate a struggle for autonomy and survival in 1950s Mexico. Its protagonist, Noemí Taboada - a young Mexican woman - confronts intersecting forces of prejudice, colonial power, and patriarchal control. The narrative intricately intertwines these social structures with the Gothic mode, producing a world in which the monstrous is omnipresent, emerging through both individual characters and the oppressive environments they inhabit. This article examines the tropes through which the novel constructs its monsters and its distinctly monstrous setting.
Keywords: gothic, horror, monstrous, trope, symbolism.

Silvia Moreno-García's highly acclaimed novel *Mexican Gothic* was published in 2020. The novel rapidly captured readers' attention, whether due to its literary merit, pandemic-era reading habits shaped by prolonged isolation, the broader resurgence of Gothic fiction, or the enduring cultural appeal of horror. It appeared on both *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* bestseller lists and was subsequently nominated for numerous awards, ultimately winning the *August Derleth Award for Best Horror Novel*[1], *Locus Horror Award*[2] and the *2021 Best Novel* category in *Aurora Awards*[3].

The novel follows a young Mexican woman, Noemí Taboada, going on a rescue mission to save her cousin Catalina. From the outset, the two women are constructed in deliberate contrast to one another. Noemí is portrayed as a darker-featured, healthy, strong-willed, rebellious, and independent young woman, with interests ranging from anthropology to parties and fast convertibles—pursuits coded as more traditionally masculine. Catalina, by contrast, is an orphan who is fairer, physically weaker, and more dependent on others, and she exhibits what Noemí's father describes as a "tendency toward the melodramatic" (García Moreno, 2020, p. 7) - traits traditionally coded as feminine. She is described by Noemí as "a creature of sighs and phrases as delicate as lace", and a "dreamer" (García Moreno, 2020, p. 48). Her melancholic disposition is reflected in her

[1] https://britishfantasysociety.org/about-the-bfs/the-british-fantasy-awards/bfa-winners/
[2] https://www.worldswithoutend.com/books_locus-h_index.asp
[3] 2021 Aurora Awards – The Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Association (CSFFA)

preference for Gothic novels such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. Although Catalina is five years older and once assumed a maternal role toward Noemí, this dynamic is now inverted: her illness positions her as the one in need of protection and care. She effectively becomes a damsel in distress whom Noemí must rescue. When a disturbing letter arrives from the newly married Catalina, who claims that her husband has been poisoning her, Noemí's father decides to send her to investigate.

In parallel with the contrast between the two central female characters, the novel's spatial settings are likewise constructed in opposition: the vibrant, noisy, and bustling environment of Mexico City stands in stark contrast to the gloomy, dark, oppressive, and silent atmosphere of the High Place. The journey from Mexico City to El Triunfo, and ultimately to the High Place, echoes the transition from the bright, vibrant, and boldly coloured world of Noemí's home to the dark and oppressive atmosphere of Catalina's new residence. This trajectory suggests a descent into darkness and a nightmarish realm, despite the High Place's perch atop the mountains, isolated even from El Triunfo, the nearest town. During her train journey, Noemí passes through a forest that recalls the fairy tales Catalina once read to her as a child, a wooded landscape that soon gives way to a wilder, more untamed terrain. These allusions to forests and fairy tales invite the reader on a symbolic journey into the subconscious, while the forest itself functions as a traditional site of personal growth and transformation. Noemí explicitly associates the landscape with "that place where *Hansel and Gretel* tossed their breadcrumbs or *Little Red Riding Hood* met a wolf" (García Moreno, 2020, p. 15). Such references foreshadow her experience at the High Place: her dreams and visions operate like breadcrumbs, guiding her toward the truth, and she assumes the role of the innocent confronting a predatory evil embodied in Howard Doyle.

When Noemí arrives in El Triunfo, she first glimpses a town "peppered with winding streets, colourful houses with flowerpots at their windows, sturdy wooden doors, long stairways, a church, and all the usual details that any guidebook would call "quaint"" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 17). Yet once she steps off the train, this picturesque image dissolves: she notices peeling paint on the walls, defaced doors, and wilting flowers – a "town clung to the dregs of splendour" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 18). Even the car Francis drives to collect her reinforces this impression, described as "dated, dirty, and it needed a paint job" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 17). While they drive up the mountain toward the High Place, "the air growing rawer, the mist intensifying" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 18), and the trees growing closer together, darkness obscuring the space under their branches, the encroaching landscape gives Noemí an unmistakably ominous feeling. This spatial defamiliarization, as Whitcombe argues, "disorients the reader, forcing them to inhabit the same anxiety-laden perspective as the characters", producing a "pervasive dread rooted in uncertainty" (2020, p. 30). The High Place, perched atop the mountain, is physically isolated from the town below - a separation that allows its master to impose his rules and maintain unchallenged dominance, much like a medieval lord presiding over a fortified castle. Like a tower, it cuts the characters off from the rest of the world. This isolation is further reinforced by the control the house exerts over its inhabitants and guests, preventing anyone from leaving without the master's approval. The decaying house, situated at such a high altitude, resembles a crumbling tower, a structure that "is a semiotic code evoking decay, loss, and the erosion of moral or social order" (Whitcombe, 2020, p. 28). Its elevation also symbolises, as towers often do, "the desire for power, the longing for

escape, or the pursuit of knowledge" (Whitcombe, 2020, p. 29), all present in Howard Doyle's character.

The name of the house - High Place - functions as a symbol of an unattainable ideal. For Howard Doyle, it signifies the promise of everlasting life. Yet the name also evokes patriarchal confinement, isolation, loneliness, alienation, melancholy, and enforced seclusion. Its inhabitants bring their partners to this remote location precisely to avoid scrutiny, prevent detection, and forestall any intervention from outsiders or concerned family members. Therefore, High Place becomes a nightmare space: suffocating and prison-like, a site that invokes terror and instils a profound sense of hopelessness in both Catalina and Noemí.

Victorian in appearance, the house's architecture reinforces this oppressive atmosphere. It is a labyrinthine structure, linked by a hidden passage to the family crypt below. In Gothic literature, the labyrinth renders "navigation disorienting", while symbolically representing "psychological entrapment, confusion, and the inescapability of fate" (Whitcombe, 2020: 30). The descent into a crypt likewise evokes a "descent into the unconscious, the realm of death, and the confrontation with buried truths" (Whitcombe, 2020, p. 29). The crypt beneath High Place further signifies "hidden corruption, frequently associated with the uncanny and the grotesque" (Whitcombe, 2020, p. 29), making the house not merely a setting but a manifestation of the Doyle family's moral and physical decay. As Whitcombe notes, "the polarity between towers and crypts thus encodes a thematic tension between the conscious and the unconscious, the visible and the hidden, aspiration and repression." (2020, p. 29), a tension that High Place embodies with unsettling precision.

At the High Place, all colours appear muted with few exceptions, contributing to the atmosphere of decay and repression. Silence, moreover, is not merely customary but enforced as a strict expectation by the master of the house. And the house itself is "odd" in Noemí's opinion, as it looks "absolutely Victorian in construction, with its broken shingles, elaborate ornamentation, and dirty bay windows", being also "terribly different from her family's modern house, the apartments of her friends, or the colonial houses with façades of red tezontle" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 20). Its inhabitants are all fair-haired and pale, except for Virgil, who is imperious and "handsome. Like a sculpture", and whose face, reminded Noemí of a "death mask" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 33). The novel reinforces its pervasive allusions to death and dying through both setting and characterization. The house stands beside an English cemetery and even contains an internal passage leading directly to the family crypt, further entwining domestic space with the presence of the dead. While its coach house looks like "a place that might have a hearse and two black horses inside" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 40). Howard Doyle's first wife is revered as the family's deceased matriarch, despite having borne no children, and the hallways and adjoining rooms are lined with portraits of successive generations of deceased Doyles, visually emphasizing the family's fixation on lineage and the purity of their bloodline.

The house is first mentioned in Catalina's letter to her uncle – it "is sick with rot, stinks of decay, brims with every single evil and cruel sentiment», with its "foul ground beneath our feet" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 7). However, Noemí dismisses her words as the ramblings of an unwell person, while her father, deeming Catalina's account unreliable after she claims that "ghosts walk through walls" at the house (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 10), even suggests in his response letter that Virgil should take her to La Castañeda asylum for a check-up.

At first, upon seeing the house Noemí senses that there is more to it than it appears – "the house seemed to leap out of the mist to greet them with eager arms", and "the house loomed over them like a great, quiet gargoyle" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 20) — but she quickly dismisses the impression, reducing it to an empty, "abandoned shell of a snail" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 21). Once a grand residence, during the height of the silver-mining enterprise, High Place now is just a ghost of its former self, marked by missing slats, a groaning ebony porch, a faded green carpet, and other signs of decay. Virgil recalls that High Place "was once a beacon, a shining jewel of a house", enriched by a mine that produced enough silver to fill the family's armoires with luxury fabrics and their cups with fine wine, though he concedes that "it is not so anymore" (García Moreno, 2020, p. 54). In contrast, at first Noemí perceives the house as merely a "quiet space of faded wallpaper and gilded frames" (García Moreno, 2020, p. 108). Over time, however, this initial neutrality transforms into a sense of palpable hostility: "it lingered too close; it was hostile and cold and she did not wish to parade before its windows, which felt, to her, like lidless, eager eyes" (García- Moreno, 2020, p. 150). The silence of the house that unnerves Noemí is one of the house's defining traits. When she tries to imagine the family's past - children running through its halls, their laughter echoing - she finds she cannot, realising that - "the house would have not allowed such a thing. The house would have demanded they spring from it fully grown" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 45). It is also described by Noemí as being as quiet as "a dress lined with lead" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 105). The comparison between the house and a lead-lined dress - an object traditionally associated with women - alludes to the oppressed women in the Doyle lineage, because the family has historically treated women as reproductive vessels. In Howard Doyle's opinion "a woman's function is to preserve the family line" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 75).

As the novel progresses, Noemí discovers far more about the house than she could have anticipated. At first, she notices only its decay, darkness, dampness, and cold. It is Catalina who draws her attention to the house's uncanny nature - "the walls speak to me. They tell me secrets. Don't listen to them, press your hands against your ears, Noemí. There are ghosts. They're real. You'll see them eventually" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 50), and also – "There're people in the walls" […] "There're people and there're voices. I see them sometimes, the people in the walls. They're dead" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 85). Although Noemí initially dismisses these warnings, she soon begins to experience unsettling dreams that intensify into fully developed nightmares. She resumes sleepwalking for the first time since childhood and later endures visions she can no longer clearly distinguish from waking reality. Troubled by these episodes, she questions their nature and her sanity, and even asks Francis whether he believes the house might be haunted. These experiences culminate in the emergence of a disembodied voice urging her to "open your eyes," a phrase that becomes a guiding refrain as she navigates the increasingly perilous and disorienting environment of High Place. Later, Noemí recognises the voice as belonging to Ruth, who had attempted to end the cycle by killing Howard Doyle but was herself killed in the process.

When visiting the town, Noemí first hears of the Doyles' curse from Marta Duval, who warns that "that family is cursed" and that "everything they touch rots" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 69). Later, Marta extends this warning to the house itself, asserting that "the house is cursed" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 125). Attempting to clarify what she means, she asks Noemí, "You know about the mal de aire? […] There're heavy places. Places where the air itself is heavy because an evil weighs it down. Sometimes it's

a death, could be it's something else, but the bad air, it'll get into your body and it'll nestle there and weigh you down. That's what's wrong with the Doyles of High Place" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 132). A similar, though distinctly more fatalistic, perspective is voiced by Francis, who tells Noemí: ""it's the house […] It wasn't made for love, the house". "Any place is made for love," she protested. "Not this place and not us. You look back two, three generations, as far as you can. You won't find love. We are incapable of such a thing"" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 155). His words reveal not only his internalization of the family's history of emotional sterility but also his belief that the house itself - shaped by the gloom and the Doyles' legacy - precludes the possibility of genuine affection. This trope of a "family evil" is reminiscent of that in *The Fall of the House of Usher* (Poe, 2011, p. 17). Additional parallels to Poe's tale emerge through the recurring presence of fungi. In *The Fall of House of Usher* Poe describes "minute fungi overspread[ing] the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves" (2011, p. 13), a detail echoed in *Mexican Gothic* through the pervasive, fungal gloom that permeates High Place. Likewise, both narratives are suffused with an atmosphere of profound melancholy—an "air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom" (Poe, 2011, p. 15) - that saturates each house and reinforces their shared preoccupation with decay, degeneration, and the burden of inherited corruption.

High Place is defined by pervasive dampness, darkness, and cold, conditions under which fungi flourish throughout the estate—from the interior rooms to the subterranean tunnels and even the adjacent burial grounds. The English cemetery, described as "a fiercely displeasing picture" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 41), appears similarly neglected, overrun with weeds and mushrooms. This pervasive fungal presence reinforces the atmosphere of decay that saturates the estate and signals the broader thematic entanglement between environment, corruption, and the family's degenerating legacy. The persistent mist and pervasive gloom create ideal conditions for their growth, allowing the fungi to spread across the entire estate. At first, Noemí notices the fungi without any suspicion regarding their significance. However, after enduring a series of dreams, nightmares, and increasingly vivid visions, she comes to understand their true nature. The fungi, which exist in a symbiotic relationship with the Doyle family, are collectively designated as "the gloom". Francis characterizes this organismic network as "a giant spider's web […] In that web, we can preserve memories, thoughts […] We call that repository of our thoughts, of our memories, the gloom" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 211). This description positions the gloom as both a biological system and an epistemological archive, a living matrix through which the family's consciousness, history, and authority are stored, transmitted, and sustained. Functioning as an extension of the Doyle lineage, the gloom generates Noemí's nightmares and visions, enabling Ruth and Agnes to disclose their memories to her and to communicate across temporal boundaries. Howard Doyle's domination of this network is secured through an act of profound violence: the sacrificial incorporation of Agnes Doyle, whose mind becomes the governing consciousness of the organism - "the creation of an afterlife, furnished with the marrow and the bones and the neurons of a woman, made of stems and spores" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 287). As the narrative explains, "the fungus needed a human mind that could serve as a vessel for memories, that could offer control" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 286). This fusion of human consciousness with fungal biology transforms the gloom into a living archive of intergenerational memory, one that preserves, distorts, and weaponises the Doyle family's history. The single word carved beside Agnes's name and year of death—*mother*—commemorates Howard's first wife while subtly signalling her foundational role in the

establishment of his dominion. His bloodline is thus built upon the suffering and exploitation of multiple women, whose bodies and identities are subsumed into the family's pursuit of continuity and control. Although Noemí receives guidance from Ruth and Agnes through the gloom, she nevertheless perceives the organism—so long as it remains under Howard Doyle's command—as a predatory presence operating in the margins of perception. To her, it resembles "a spider's web", in which "the lightest movement would reveal their presence, and the spider would pounce on them" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 255). This imagery reinforces the sense of the gloom as an instrument of entrapment, one that mirrors the broader dynamics of coercion and exploitation structuring the Doyle family's power.

The house itself is permeated by gloom, and this fungal network harbours multiple consciousnesses, rendering High Place less a conventional haunted dwelling than a structure animated by a collective, parasitic intelligence. This configuration transforms the estate into a living organism—one whose sentience derives not from ghosts but from an accumulated, interwoven archive of minds sustained within the fungal matrix. The effect is to recast the Gothic haunted house through the logic of biological haunting, where the source of terror is not the supernatural but an invasive, distributed form of cognition embedded in the very architecture of the home. The haunted house trope in Gothic fiction traditionally allows ghosts and spirits to "assert their presence and disrupt the authority of the living", and in doing so, "Gothic spaces create room for counter narratives, allowing suppressed histories and identities to emerge" (Whitcombe, 2020, pp. 32-33). Within *Mexican Gothic*, this dynamic is reconfigured through the gloom, which functions as a biological rather than supernatural medium of haunting. By the novel's conclusion, Noemí comes to understand that the "frightening and twisted" presence enveloping High Place is not an abstract malevolence but the embodied residue of Agnes's suffering - a psychic imprint produced by years of coercion, exploitation, and despair. What remains of Agnes within the gloom is only "a sliver," yet that fragment continues to "scream in agony" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 292), transforming the house into a repository of trauma that refuses erasure. This trauma-encoded environment enables the Gothic counter-history to surface, and together these elements enrich the novel's reconfiguration of the haunted house as a living archive of violence, rather than a mere site of spectral intrusion. By transforming the space into a repository of accumulated suffering, the narrative shifts the locus of haunting from supernatural apparitions to the enduring imprint of historical harm.

The gloom operates as a heterotopic zone in which multiple temporalities converge, preserving the memories, emotions, and consciousnesses of numerous individuals within a single, living matrix. As McClelland notes, "the gloom functions as a liminal space wherein the silenced women of High Place communicate the trauma they've endured" (McClelland, 2024, p. 35). Within the broader Gothic tradition, such liminal environments frequently serve as "symbolic portals where identity, reality, and stability can be altered" (Whitcombe, 2020, p. 31), enabling the emergence of suppressed histories and destabilized subjectivities. Positioned between life and death, the gloom becomes a repository of "generational trauma" produced by "manipulative patriarchal power" (McClelland, 2024, p. 41), transforming the very landscape of High Place into an archive of accumulated suffering and trauma.

High Place, conceived as a symbiotic organism, is rendered unmistakably alive. The narrative depicts it as a corporeal structure composed of veins and organs, "a cage made of organs", with "walls of flesh" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 120). The entire estate is

suffused with the consciousness of Agnes Doyle - manipulated and sustained by Howard - as well as the accumulated memories and residual psychic imprints of successive generations of the Doyle family. This fusion of architecture, biology, and memory transforms High Place into a sentient environment, one in which the boundaries between house, body, and archive collapse into a single, living system. The estate is further saturated with the corporeal remains of the labourers who perished within its confines, their bodies absorbed into the fungal network and effectively reduced to organic matter - used, as the novel starkly notes, "mulch" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 239). This incorporation of human remains into the very substance of the house underscores the extent to which the Doyle family's power is materially rooted in exploitation, rendering the estate not merely a site of habitation but a literal embodiment of the violence that sustains it. Noemí's realization that the house appears to be built upon human remains - "this house had been built atop bones. And no one had noticed such an atrocity, rows and rows of people streaming into the house, into the mine, and never leaving. Never to be mourned, never to be found" Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 247) - further exposes the depth of this structural brutality. Yet, because of its parasitic dependence on Howard Doyle, whose vitality has been severely diminished following Ruth's attack, the house no longer possesses the energy required to fully regenerate or sustain him. This depletion reveals the fragility of the system: a parasitic network that can no longer adequately nourish its host, thereby exposing the inherent instability of the power structure it was designed to uphold. As a consequence, the house persistently siphons vitality from its inhabitants in a desperate effort to sustain both itself and its master. This parasitic extraction is vividly dramatized in one of Noemí's nightmares, in which she is drawn through the corridors of High Place by the maddening rhythm of a beating heart. Her wandering leads her to a grotesque figure lying upon a bed - "a man on a bed. Only it wasn't truly a man. It was a bloated vision of a man, as if he'd drowned and floated to the surface, his pale body lined with blue veins, tumours flowering on his legs, his hands, his belly. A pustule, not a man, a living, breathing, pustule" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 118). This nightmarish image encapsulates the corporeal degradation produced by the gloom's parasitic logic, rendering visible the physical and moral decay that underpins the Doyle family's authority. Howard Doyle's physical body is not far removed from this grotesque vision. Noemí's initial encounter with Howard Doyle upon her arrival at High Place immediately situates his body within a register of degeneration and the grotesque. She notes that "he was ancient, his face gouged with wrinkles, a few sparse hairs stubbornly attached to his skull. He was very pale too, like an underground creature. A slug, perhaps. His veins contrasted with his pallor, thin, spidery lines of purple and blue" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 28). Such imagery aligns his physical presence with decay, parasitism, and the uncanny, reinforcing the novel's broader construction of him as both corporeally and morally aberrant. When Noemí later declares her intention to leave High Place and is compelled to bid farewell to Howard Doyle, she confronts an even more disturbing spectacle. She finds him lying naked atop the blankets, his skin "terribly pale" and his veins forming grotesque indigo tracings across his body. More horrifying still is the condition of one of his legs, "hideously bloated" and encrusted with numerous dark, pulsating boils that stand in stark contrast to the rest of his emaciated frame (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 205). The comparison to barnacles on a ship's hull underscores the parasitic and putrefactive associations that dominate his characterization. Although he appears corpse-like, marked by signs of advanced decay, he remains alive, his laboured breathing the only indication of continued vitality. The narrative thus emphasizes that while the gloom sustains Howard Doyle's life, it simultaneously deteriorates alongside

him. As a tyrannical patriarch whose authority is bound to his physical form, he awaits a suitable replacement for his failing body—an appropriate vessel into which he may eventually transmigrate. This dynamic accentuates the novel's interrogation of embodied corruption and the parasitic logic of power. In his quest for immortality, Howard Doyle cultivates the gloom as both a biological and ideological apparatus, securing the continual emergence of an appropriate host. His survival depends upon the transference of his consciousness into a physically robust descendant, thereby perpetuating his authority through the literal occupation of another body.

Howard Doyle's grotesque physical deterioration is inseparable from his moral corruption. He is portrayed as callous, misogynistic, megalomaniacal, and relentlessly power-hungry, displaying a profound disregard for human life that extends far beyond his treatment of women and mine workers. His cruelty encompasses even his English servants, whose minds have been hollowed out by the gloom. He pointedly refers to them as "bondservants" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 214), a term that signals their reduction to mere biological instruments. With their personalities effectively erased, their bodies become sites of continuous, cost-free exploitation, facilitating a system of labour extraction unburdened by the ethical, emotional, or material obligations that typically accompany human servitude. His moral corruption drives his relentless pursuit of eternal life, pursued with complete indifference to its human cost. Even his own flesh and blood must submit to his desires, as he appropriates the bodies of his descendants for the purposes of transmigration, treating them not as autonomous individuals but as vessels to be emptied, inhabited, and discarded at will. This practice exposes the full extent of his dehumanising logic: kinship offers no protection, and familial bonds hold value only insofar as they enable the perpetuation of his authority. It is exemplified in Ruth confession to Noemí: "Our father is a monster who comes at night, creeping around this house. […] He can always hurt us. He never stops hurting us. He will never stop" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 256). Even more disturbingly, in his pursuit of immortality and a god-like status, he resorts to cannibalising his own offspring and distributing fragments of its body among his kin. This act represents the ultimate violation of familial and moral boundaries, reducing his descendants to consumable resources and revealing a worldview in which the preservation of his power justifies even the most abhorrent forms of exploitation.

Nearly three centuries earlier, Howard Doyle had encountered a cult whose members ingested a mycelial substance believed to confer longevity and accelerated healing. To maintain these effects, the cultists engaged in ritualistic cannibalism, consuming the flesh of their priests after their demise. Once healed by the cult, he gained their trust only to betray them. Howard Doyle subsequently killed the presiding priest and destroyed the contents of the cave in which the rituals were performed. Thereafter, in an effort to prolong his own life, he adopted and replicated the same practices once employed by the priest. He modified the ritual so that, rather than sacrificing his own flesh for the benefit of his family, he consumed his newborn child - conceived with a former cult member previously exposed to the fungi - and distributed the infant's remains to his relatives as the "flesh of gods," engaging in an act of ritualized cannibalism intended to secure immortality (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 219). Through sustained experimentation and successive refinements of the ritual procedures, he ultimately achieves the successful transmigration of his consciousness into another body, thereby securing the continuation of his authority through the appropriation of a new corporeal vessel.

His relentless pursuit of immortality through research, experimentation, and repeated trial-and-error invokes the Gothic motif of forbidden knowledge, a transgressive quest traditionally linked to hubris and moral decay. The narrative further entwines this pursuit with satanic and occult resonances**,** heightening the sense that Howard's scientific ambitions operate in contempt of sacred moral boundaries. These associations are strategically employed to emphasise the monstrosity of his character: his desire for eternal life is not cast as a noble or tragic endeavour but as a deliberate violation of natural, ethical, and spiritual limits, revealing a figure who willingly embraces corruption as the necessary price of power. By appropriating and modifying elements of the Christian Mass, he constructs an elaborate ritual designed to assert dominance and captivate his followers, thereby securing for himself a god like status. He even adopts the dictum *"et verbum caro factum est"* (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 41), further underscoring the sacrilegious nature of his performance. The process of transmigration requires both total submission and physiological compatibility between host and successor; consequently, the elaborate pageantry functions as a mechanism for cultivating the host's willingness and ensuring the ritual's success. He compels Noemí to ingest a mixture of his saliva and blood in an attempt to assert control over her, and later, during the wedding ceremony, he forces her to consume a fragment of mushroom - both of which function as a perverse form of communion. These acts are designed to strengthen her bond with gloom and further entrench his dominance. The Doyles' family crest - the *ouroboros*, a serpent consuming its own tail - symbolises "the infinite, above us, and below" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 87). For Howard Doyle, it represents immortality and mastery over death itself, allowing him to sustain his authority indefinitely. Later, Noemí realises that Agnes herself is "the snake biting its tail" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 292), a revelation that underscores the cyclical logic of the family's power and the self-perpetuating nature of their dominion.

Howard Doyle regards and treats women as reproductive vessels—means to an end and objects to be possessed. He maintains the compatibility of his bloodline with the fungus through practices of incest and selective breeding, given that most individuals are biologically incompatible with it. This incompatibility, in turn, accounts for the deaths of the majority of the mine workers. In Virgil's words - "my family, as you might know, has strived to keep the bloodline clean. Our selective breeding has allowed us to transmit the most desirable traits. Our compatibility with the fungi in this house is the result of that. There's one tiny problem" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, pp. 239-240). Despite Howard Doyle's efforts, the sustained inbreeding inevitably produces stillbirths and miscarriages, compelling him to send members of his family into the wider world in search of biologically compatible partners – "on occasion you need to inject new blood into the mix" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 240).

His criteria for selecting potential partners prioritize, above all, compatibility with the fungus; financial resources follow, given the Doyle family's increasing destitution, and aesthetic appeal also plays a significant role. As Howard Doyle explains to Noemí - "beauty attracts beauty and begets beauty. It is a means of selection" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 30). Florence echoes this logic when she remarks that Howard "simply wants to have [Noemí] […] a little butterfly in his collection. One more pretty girl" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 248). She also tells Noemí - "you think you have a special power simply because my uncle thinks you possess a pretty face. But that's not power. It's a liability" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 115). This perspective is echoed by Virgil's attitude toward Noemí:

> "The strong survive, the weak are left behind. I think you're quite strong," he said. "And what a pretty face you have. Dark skin, dark eyes. Such a novelty".
>
> Dark meat, she thought. Nothing but meat, she was the equivalent of a cut of beef inspected by the butcher and wrapped up in waxed paper. An exotic little something to stir the loins and make the mouth water (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 239).

This objectification of women aligns with the broader commodification of the female body to which he subjects the women in his life. With the aid of the gloom, both Howard Doyle and Virgil intrude upon Noemí's sleep: Howard inspects her naked body, while Virgil attempts to seduce and coerce her, deploying sexuality and eroticism as instruments to erode her autonomy and force her into submission. Drawing on Gelder's discussion of vampires in fiction, who notes that "this often highly attractive monster may combine terror with an erotic awakening, drawing out latent inner desires" (2002, p. 146), this dynamic clearly resonates with the predatory allure exerted over Noemí. The Doyles are willing to resort to whatever means necessary to compel Noemí to join them, providing both healthy offspring and access to her wealth.

Howard Doyle's worldview is deeply informed by pseudo-Darwinian and atavistic theories, which he appropriates to justify his eugenic approach to reproduction and lineage preservation. He subscribes to the notion of hierarchically ordered "superior" and "inferior" races, and consequently to the corresponding traits he believes can be exploited for his own ends. His ideological commitments are evident in the materials he curates within the family library, where "the shelves also contained issues of old magazines, including *Eugenics: A Journal of Race Betterment* and the *American Journal of Eugenics*" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 38). His family - Francis being the sole exception - largely shares these convictions. This becomes explicit when Florence chastises Noemí after Howard selects her as a prospective addition to the Doyle lineage: "God knows what degenerative strain runs through your body. An outsider, a member of a disharmonic race" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 251). Virgil similarly remarks that locals are "underfed peasants ridden with lice" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 239) and reveals the family's eugenic logic when he remarks to Noemí, "I might have picked you rather than her. You're healthy, young, and the gloom rather likes you", indicating his preference for her over his own wife, Catalina, who is also her cousin (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 240). Their views represent those of colonisers towards the colonized. The novel is "featuring prominently an English patriarchy that colonized the narrative's rural Mexican town" (McClelland, 2024, p. 34).

Howard Doyle was forced to flee England when the silver mine ran dry and local residents grew increasingly suspicious of his behaviour. As Francis explains, "It had run out, over there. Silver, tin, and our luck. And the people back in England, they suspected us of odd doings. Howard thought they'd ask fewer questions here, that he'd be able to do as he wished. He wasn't wrong" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 247). Doyle therefore brought his family to Mexico both to exploit new silver deposits and to establish an isolated environment where he could rebuild his life without scrutiny. High Place was intended to be more than a residence: it was designed to alleviate his longing for England. Therefore, the house replicates English houses and their décor, a thing that Noemí observed when she first arrived at High Place: "little landscape paintings decorated the walls, coastal images of great cliffs and lonely beaches, but these were not local views. This was England, most likely, preserved in oils and silver frames" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 24). Another function of the house was to provide a suitable medium for the fungi. The faster the construction

progressed, the sooner Doyle could consolidate his dominion. Consequently, both the house and the gloom became his central preoccupation. To avoid arousing suspicion among the locals, he justified the importation of foreign soil by claiming it was necessary for cultivating roses, an explanation that echoes Dracula's reliance on "friendly soil" (Stoker, 2009, p. 23). As Marta Duval recounts, "he wanted the house built quickly and he wanted a great garden, in the English style, with rose beds. He even brought boxes filled with earth from Europe to make sure the flowers would take" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 127).

Marta provided Noemí with the historical context necessary to understand the Doyles' presence and actions in Mexico. She explained that Howard Doyle brought English labourers to construct High Place and reopen the mine, later supplementing them with local workers when the initial workforce proved insufficient. Noemí fills in the gaps in Marta's account once she uncovers the missing pieces through the gloom and the Doyles' fragmented stories. The first wave of worker deaths from a mysterious illness corresponds to the initial rooting of the fungus. Supplied with numerous bodies as "mulch," along with Alice's sacrifice, the gloom flourishes and requires no further victims for a time. Howard Doyle disguises Alice's death as another case of the same sickness that had killed the miners, enabling him to evade suspicion. He then hires new staff, both English and local, and although the local workers are subjected to extreme cruelty, economic necessity forces them to remain. A second outbreak occurs after Doyle's remarriage, as the gloom exhausts its resources and, in search of new ones, infects the workers, resulting in additional deaths. The surviving labourers eventually rebel, and the torrential rains flood the mine. Injured and weakened by Ruth's attempt to kill him in her effort to end his domination, Howard Doyle is unable to reassert control, which ultimately leads to the abandonment of both the mine and the exploitation of silver. His debilitated condition, combined with Ruth's killing of several family members, creates an urgent need for new blood and financial resources. The gloom, having once again depleted its reserves in its efforts to keep Howard alive, begins siphoning vitality from the remaining Doyles in order to sustain both itself and its patriarch. This parasitic drain manifests in the pale, sickly, and weakened appearance of the surviving family members. Only Virgil remains relatively unaffected, both because Howard is grooming him as a future host body and because he has spent time away from High Place while courting Catalina. As Francis explains to Noemí: "Great Uncle Howard is going to die. There's no stopping it. The fungus extends your life, but it can't keep you going forever. His body will give way soon, and afterward he'll begin the transmigration. He will take possession of Virgil's body" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 232).

As preparations for Howard's impending transmigration unfold, the Doyle family reveals profound internal fractures rather than cohesion. Francis, having witnessed the psychological and physical torment that drove his own father to suicide, identifies deeply with Noemí and Catalina's vulnerability. Motivated by this empathy and by a desire to break the cycle of suffering within High Place, he commits to aiding their escape. He formulates a plan to act upon at the moment when Howard's influence is expected to weaken during the ritual of transmigration. Virgil, by contrast, pursues an entirely self-serving agenda. Coveting Howard's authority, he seeks to manipulate Noemí as a strategic diversion, thereby creating the conditions necessary to usurp control for himself. The divergence between the two cousins could not be more pronounced. Virgil is marked by an imperious disposition and a beauty likened to that of a death mask (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, pp. 32-33). Noemí further observes that "he was hard and unpleasant, and beneath

that veneer of wretched civility she knew he could be beastly" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 202). His ethical orientation closely mirrors that of his uncle, whose ideological convictions he inherits and reproduces. Lacking compassion and driven by an acquisitive hunger for wealth and dominance, Virgil embodies a distinctly predatory form of masculinity. Noemí's perceptiveness allows her to classify the Doyles according to the dispositions they manifest: "she thought Howard looked like an insect and Florence was an insectivorous plant. But Virgil Doyle, he was a carnivore, high up the food chain" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 146). This taxonomy underscores the novel's broader depiction of the Doyle family as a hierarchical system of predation, with Virgil positioned at its most perilous apex. It also reflects the wider internal power dynamics that structure the household, within which Francis occupies the lowest rank, rendered subordinate to every other member of the family.

Francis, by contrast, functions as the antithesis of his cousin. Thin, blue-eyed, and conspicuously pale, he immediately strikes Noemí as physically delicate. Her first impression casts him as undernourished and almost ethereal, a young man who "sustained himself on dewdrops and honey" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 20) and whose voice scarcely rose above a whisper. His appearance continues to trouble her: his extreme thinness, the "plaster saint" quality of his features, and the dark circles beneath his eyes suggest to her the presence of a concealed illness (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 43). When later comparing the two cousins, Noemí judges Virgil conventionally handsome and Francis decidedly not; yet she finds herself drawn to Francis's idiosyncrasies, describing his awkwardness and unconventional looks as unexpectedly endearing. The very traits she typically finds unappealing in men - his timidity, social unease, and lack of performative masculinity - become, in his case, markers of sincerity and quiet intelligence (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 177). Within the oppressive atmosphere of High Place, Francis appears to have cultivated a moral sensibility that distinguishes him sharply from the rest of his family. Whether shaped by his father's influence or emerging from his own innate disposition, this ethical awareness is evident in his recollection of childhood abuse at the hands of his great-uncle, an experience that leads him to recognize the legitimacy of Ruth's earlier rebellion (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 180). His growing moral clarity culminates in an urgent plea for Noemí to flee and save herself, accompanied by an explicit warning against trusting any member of the Doyle household "uncle Howard is a monster […] Don't trust Howard, don't trust Florence, and don't trust Virgil. Now you should go. I wish I didn't have to send you off so quickly, but I should" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 181).

In this context, Francis functions as a foil to Virgil, his vulnerability, empathy, and ethical clarity illuminating the latter's predatory disposition and underscoring the moral corruption that permeates the family. His compassion becomes evident in the aftermath of Howard Doyle's coercion, when Noemí is forced to ingest his blood and saliva - an act intended to hasten her assimilation into the gloom. Francis tends to her distress, and his care intensifies following her failed attempt to escape the house. Francis intervenes to shield her from Virgil's advances, guides her toward consuming only food uncontaminated by the fungus, and supplies both her and Catalina with the tincture that weakens the gloom's influence. He prepares their provisions for escape and even offers Noemí his straight razor to help her feel safer after Virgil's assaultive behaviour. His actions directly sabotage the family's plans**,** marking him as the sole Doyle who actively resists the parasitic system into which he was born. His resistance offers a counter-narrative that destabilises and ultimately deconstructs the family's dominant one**,** exposing the

possibility of ethical agency within a lineage otherwise defined by coercion, violence, and parasitic control.

Francis initially resistant to the idea of leaving the family - thinking that he would be like “a fish out of water”, being “fashioned for a single end” (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 254) - yet he ultimately agrees to escape alongside Noemí and Catalina. As the moment of Howard Doyle’s physical death approaches, the urgency of transmigration intensifies. Before attempting the ritual, however, Howard orchestrates a grotesque mock marriage between Francis and Noemí, during which they exchange dried pieces of mushroom in place of wedding rings, a parody of the Catholic mass that mimics the sharing of the communion wafer and wine. While the household is preoccupied with preparations for Howard’s impending transfer, Virgil seizes the opportunity to assault Noemí, only for her to resist and shove him away with force. She flees the room to retrieve her cousin Catalina, only to be attacked by the maid. Francis intervenes, distracting the maid even as she attempts to strangle him, allowing Noemí to slash the woman’s neck in self-defence. Their attempt to escape is cut short when Florence intercepts them at gunpoint. The group is then forced to Howard’s room, where - because of the urgency of his impending death - it is decided that there is no time to summon Virgil for the transmigration ritual, and Francis will be used in his place. Noemí is horrified by Florence’s indifference to this substitution, especially when she dismissively remarks, “it’s a body” (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 272), revealing the family’s complete erosion of moral and familial bonds. As the ceremony begins, Noemí recognises the horror of what is unfolding - “a demented cycle. Children devoured as babes, children devoured as adults. Children are but food. Food for a cruel god” (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 273).

Catalina’s sudden intervention, stabbing Howard and disrupting the ritual, enables Noemí to gather the still-dazed Francis and attempt an escape. Their flight is immediately thwarted when Florence attacks, breaking Noemí’s arm. Florence then tries to shoot her, but Francis intervenes, and the gun discharges fatally against Florence herself. Howard, desperate to complete the ceremony, blocks their escape, forcing Noemí to fire at him before dragging Francis and Catalina away. With the front door locked, they flee through the family crypt, where they come upon the body of Agnes, now entirely enveloped in a thick layer of mushrooms that drape her like a macabre funeral shroud. She appears as the grotesque core of the gloom’s consciousness**,** the physical locus in which the family’s parasitic history, its violence, and its perverse pursuit of immortality have been preserved and cultivated. This encounter exposes the biological and symbolic seat of the Doyle legacy, revealing the extent to which Agnes’s body has been transformed into both the anchor and the prison of the family’s corrupted lineage.

Distracted by the agonised buzzing emanating from Agnes, they are intercepted by Virgil, who reveals that he had orchestrated the chaos from the outset, intending to exploit Noemí’s disruption as a means of consolidating power. He attempts to subdue her through the gloom’s psychic influence, but Francis intervenes, attacking him. As the two struggle, Noemí sets Agnes ablaze—a decisive act that destabilises the gloom and weakens both Virgil and Francis; because Noemí and Catalina have consumed the tincture, they remain unaffected. The flames release the trapped consciousnesses and enact a symbolic purge of the Doyle legacy. Virgil makes a final attempt to stop their escape, prompting Catalina to stab him. With the fire rapidly spreading, the girls lift the injured Francis and flee the crypt, slipping out through the cemetery gate as the house before them erupts into flames.

The trio survives, eventually reaching Dr. Camarillo’s office with the help of two farmers and their donkeys. As they recover from the ordeal, they begin to imagine a shared

future in Mexico City. Ultimately, both Noemí and Francis emerge as *destroying angels* in relation to the Doyles - a role foreshadowed earlier in the novel when Noemí crushes a poisonous mushroom in the cemetery (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 102). By resisting the family's psychic and biological control, they bring about the collapse of Howard Doyle's patriarchal authority and the parasitic system it sustained. However, true to the conventions of the Gothic, the narrative refuses a fully consolatory ending. *Mexican Gothic* closes with Francis's unsettling dream, a vision that suggests the lingering, perhaps inescapable, imprint of the Doyle legacy:

> I did dream the house had stitched itself together and I was inside of it, and this time there was no way out. I was alone in the house, and all the doors were sealed […] It was grander than before. It was the house before it had fallen into disrepair; the colours were vivid and there were flowers growing in the greenhouse, but flowers also grew inside, and there were forests of mushrooms up the staircase and in the rooms […] And when I walked, mushrooms sprouted from my footsteps" (Moreno-Garcia, 2020, p. 302).

This dream functions as a final Gothic reminder of the past's persistence, suggesting that although the physical house has been destroyed, its psychological and biological residue continues to haunt Francis. The imagery of regeneration through decay - flowers and mushrooms blooming in impossible abundance - evokes both renewal and contamination, implying that the trauma of High Place may yet reproduce itself in memory, dream, or fear. In this sense, the novel ends not with triumph but with ambiguous survival, a hallmark of the Gothic mode, where escape rarely guarantees freedom.

The novel ultimately constructs a world in which the monstrous is omnipresent, manifesting not only through individual characters but also through the oppressive environments they inhabit. Howard Doyle, the family patriarch, stands as the clearest embodiment of this monstrosity - an archetype of corruption and decay, both physical and moral. He represents the abject and the immoral, his grotesque body mirroring the grotesquerie of his desires and actions. The space he occupies with his family is equally tainted: High Place itself becomes an extension of his corruption, a decaying environment that reflects and reinforces the moral rot at the centre of the Doyle lineage. In this way, the novel entwines character and setting to produce a Gothic landscape where monstrosity is systemic, inherited, and inescapably woven into the fabric of the world.

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