

Modern Myth-Making: The Role of *Mexican Gothic* in Reflecting And Reimagining American Mythology

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Abstract

This paper, titled “Modern Myth-Making: The Role of *Mexican Gothic* in Reflecting and Reimagining American Mythology,” investigates how Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s *Mexican Gothic* reinterprets American mythological themes through its innovative blend of Mexican folklore and Gothic horror. Set in the 1950s Mexican countryside, the novel incorporates traditional Gothic elements, such as the haunted manor and supernatural disturbances. This analysis demonstrates how *Mexican Gothic* contributes to the American literary canon by expanding the scope of American mythology to include diverse cultural narratives. By exploring the novel’s integration of Mexican folklore, its modern adaptation of Gothic tropes, and its critique of colonial legacies, the paper reveals how contemporary literature reimagines mythological constructs. It argues that *Mexican Gothic* not only revitalizes the Gothic genre but also challenges and enriches traditional American myths, offering a nuanced perspective on identity, history, and the supernatural in a globalized context. This study highlights the significance of multicultural influences in shaping modern myth-making and expanding the boundaries of American mythology.

Keywords: American Mythology, Mexican Gothic, Colonialism, Supernatural, Reimagining myths.

Introduction

American mythology, rooted in a combination of indigenous myths, colonial histories, and cultural folklore, American mythology reflects the diverse experiences and beliefs that have shaped the nation. Central themes include the American Dream, the frontier spirit, and

the quest for freedom, as well as figures such as the pioneer, the self-made man, and the heroic outlaw.

In literature, American mythology serves as a foundational element, providing both a mirror to the nation's values and a canvas for exploring its complexities. Contemporary authors often reimagine classic myths or integrate new mythological elements to reflect changing social, cultural, and political landscapes. This ongoing evolution allows literature to address current issues such as identity, colonialism, and multiculturalism, while also exploring the intersections between different cultural narratives. By integrating diverse cultural perspectives, such as those in *Mexican Gothic*, modern literature enriches and redefines American mythology. This approach not only broadens the mythological framework but also fosters a more inclusive understanding of the American experience.

Silvia Moreno-Garcia is a Mexican-Canadian author known for her versatile storytelling across various genres, including fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Born in Mexico and currently residing in Canada, Moreno-Garcia draws from her rich cultural background to craft narratives that blend Mexican folklore, historical contexts, and genre conventions. Her works often explore themes such as identity, power, and cultural heritage, while also challenging traditional genre boundaries.

She gained widespread acclaim with her novel *Mexican Gothic* (2020), which blends Gothic horror with Mexican history and indigenous myths. In addition to her writing, Moreno-Garcia has also worked as a publisher, editor, and columnist, contributing significantly to the literary world by promoting diverse voices and stories. Her work is characterized by its unique ability to engage with contemporary issues while weaving in elements of the fantastic and the uncanny. "High Place is not just a setting but a character in its own right, embodying the sins and secrets of colonial history" (Moreno-Garcia, 75). This quote illustrates how the novel's setting is integral to its exploration of colonial legacies.

Understanding American Mythology: Traditional vs. Modern Perspectives

American mythology traditionally revolves around themes such as the frontier spirit, manifest destiny and individualism. These myths have been shaped by historical events, cultural narratives, and literature, reflecting ideals of heroism, freedom, and conquest.

However, such myths have often excluded diverse cultural perspectives, focusing instead on a predominantly Eurocentric vision of American identity and values.

In contemporary literature, there is a growing effort to expand and diversify these mythological constructs. Modern myth-making embraces multicultural influences, recognizing that America's cultural landscape is rich and varied, shaped by multiple voices and histories. This shift allows for a more inclusive approach to understanding what constitutes "American mythology," moving beyond the traditional themes to incorporate stories that reflect the country's diverse populace.

The Gothic Tradition: Elements and Evolution

The Gothic genre, with its roots in the 18th century, has long been associated with themes of horror, decay, and the supernatural. Classic Gothic literature often features haunted settings, mysterious events, and psychological tension, aimed at evoking fear and suspense. Works like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* have defined the genre, drawing on fears of the unknown and the repressed aspects of society. However, the Gothic has always been more than just tales of terror; it is a mode that interrogates social, cultural, and political anxieties. "The Gothic tradition thrives on the tension between the known and the unknown, often revealing deeper truths through its horror" (Barker, 22). This line connects to the way *Mexican Gothic* uses Gothic elements to reveal hidden aspects of colonial history and identity. The genre's adaptability has allowed it to evolve, embracing new settings and concerns. In the hands of contemporary writers like Silvia Moreno-Garcia, the Gothic becomes a tool to explore issues such as race, gender, colonialism, and identity, reflecting a broader spectrum of experiences.

Integrating Mexican Folklore: Broadening the American Mythological Canon

Mexican Gothic broadens the American mythological canon by incorporating Mexican folklore and cultural elements that are often marginalized in mainstream narratives. The novel's setting in the Mexican countryside and its use of indigenous myths and local beliefs challenge the dominance of Eurocentric perspectives in Gothic literature and American mythology.

For example, the novel references indigenous beliefs and traditions, such as the legend of the Nagual (a shape-shifting creature in Mesoamerican folklore), which adds depth to the

supernatural elements of the story. By blending these with Gothic tropes, Moreno-Garcia creates a hybrid narrative that expands the boundaries of what can be considered part of the American literary tradition. This approach not only reimagines traditional American myths but also emphasizes the importance of cultural diversity in shaping modern mythology.

Reimagining Gothic Tropes: A New Take on the Gothic Tradition

In *Mexican Gothic*, Silvia Moreno-Garcia reinterprets traditional Gothic tropes to comment on broader social and political issues. The novel retains key Gothic elements—a haunted manor, a brooding atmosphere, mysterious illnesses, and eerie family secrets—but places them in a new context that reflects Mexico's complex colonial history.

The haunted house, for instance, is a staple of Gothic fiction, representing decay and the unknown. In *Mexican Gothic*, the house (High Place) becomes a symbol of colonial exploitation and oppression. The mansion is home to the Doyle family, British colonizers who exploited local labor in their silver mine. The house itself is decaying, a metaphor for the decline of colonial power, and is filled with dark secrets that reflect the violent and oppressive history of colonialism. Through this reimagining, Moreno-Garcia uses the Gothic setting to critique colonial legacies and to highlight the ways in which history continues to haunt the present.

Critiquing Colonial Legacies: A Postcolonial Reading of *Mexican Gothic*

Mexican Gothic offers a powerful critique of colonial legacies and their impact on contemporary society. The Doyle family represents the lingering influence of colonialism in Mexico. The family's obsession with racial purity, their exploitation of indigenous labor, and their use of eugenics to maintain control are all reflections of colonial ideologies that privileged European descent over indigenous and mixed-race peoples. "Colonial narratives often obscure the voices of the colonized, but modern literature increasingly seeks to reclaim and reinterpret these voices" (Bhabha, 97).

Moreno-Garcia uses the Gothic genre's characteristic elements of horror and the supernatural to expose the insidious effects of colonialism. The supernatural events in the novel, such as the sentient mould that infects the house and the strange hallucinations experienced by the characters, can be seen as metaphors for the psychological and cultural

scars left by colonialism. The novel suggests that these legacies are not confined to the past but continue to shape contemporary identities and power dynamics.

Modern Myth-Making in *Mexican Gothic*: Creating New Myths

By blending Mexican folklore, Gothic horror, and a critique of colonialism, *Mexican Gothic* engages in modern myth-making that reshapes traditional narratives. The novel constructs new myths that reflect a more diverse and globalized understanding of identity and history. “Mexican Gothic exemplifies a contemporary reinvention of Gothic tropes, infusing them with local cultural elements to challenge and expand the genre” (Gordon, 130).

Moreno-Garcia’s work also revitalizes the Gothic genre, showing how it can be adapted to address contemporary concerns. By using the genre to critique colonialism and explore issues of race and gender, she demonstrates the continued relevance of the Gothic as a mode of storytelling that can engage with modern anxieties and cultural shifts. *Mexican Gothic* illustrates the importance of incorporating multicultural influences in contemporary literature. By expanding the scope of American mythology to include diverse cultural narratives, the novel fosters a more inclusive literary landscape that reflects the complexity of the modern world. This inclusivity is crucial for understanding the multiple histories and identities that make up American culture.

The themes and characters in *Mexican Gothic* connect deeply with the concept of American mythology by challenging its traditional narratives and expanding its cultural scope. Noemí Taboada, the novel’s protagonist, embodies resistance against patriarchal and colonial oppression, contrasting sharply with the archetypal heroes of American mythology who often represent conquest and dominance. Her journey into the heart of the haunted mansion symbolizes a confrontation with the dark legacies of colonialism, akin to the American Gothic tradition’s exploration of hidden sins and suppressed histories. Themes such as racial purity, exploitation, and the struggle for identity reflect a critique of the myths of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism, highlighting the exclusion of marginalized voices from these national stories. Through its Gothic lens, the novel reimagines American mythology by including Mexican cultural narratives and folklore, positioning them as integral to the broader tapestry of American identity. By blending the supernatural with social commentary, *Mexican Gothic* reshapes mythological constructs to reflect a more inclusive and diverse American

experience, suggesting that the myths that define a culture must evolve to embrace all its stories.

Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic* serves as a vital contribution to the broadening of the American literary canon by challenging its traditional boundaries and enriching it with diverse cultural perspectives. "Gothic fiction frequently serves as a critique of social and political anxieties, reflecting the fears and desires of its time" (Cohen, 15). Historically, the American literary canon has been shaped largely by Eurocentric narratives that emphasize themes such as individualism, the frontier spirit, and manifest destiny, often neglecting the voices and stories of marginalized communities. Moreno-Garcia's novel reimagines the Gothic genre by infusing it with Mexican cultural elements, folklore, and postcolonial critique, thereby expanding the scope of what is considered "American" literature. *Mexican Gothic* incorporates elements of Mexican folklore and indigenous myths, which have traditionally been marginalized in mainstream American literature. For example, the novel references local legends such as the Nagual, a shape-shifting creature in Mesoamerican folklore, alongside the more familiar Gothic tropes of haunted houses and sinister family secrets. By blending these different mythological elements, Moreno-Garcia challenges the dominance of Eurocentric narratives and positions Mexican cultural stories as an integral part of American mythology. This inclusion not only enriches the literary landscape by introducing new themes, symbols, and archetypes but also underscores the need to recognize the diverse cultural influences that have always been a part of American literature, even if they have been historically overlooked or undervalued.

The characters in *Mexican Gothic* also contribute to the broadening of the American literary canon by offering new perspectives on identity, power, and resistance. Noemí Taboada, the novel's protagonist, is a young, independent Mexican woman who defies traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Unlike the passive Gothic heroines of the past, Noemí is active, intelligent, and assertive, challenging the patriarchal structures represented by the Doyle family, the British colonizers who own the decaying mansion. Her character represents a break from the typical American literary archetypes that often glorify rugged individualism and masculine heroism. Instead, Noemí's narrative highlights themes of female empowerment, resilience, and resistance against oppressive forces. By centering a character like Noemí, *Mexican Gothic* contributes to a more inclusive canon that values diverse experiences and voices.

Moreover, the novel's engagement with issues of race and colonialism offers a critical lens through which to examine American mythology. The Doyle family's obsession with racial purity and their exploitation of indigenous and mixed-race people reflect a critique of the racial hierarchies and colonial ideologies that have shaped much of American history. These elements challenge the myth of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny by exposing the violence, exploitation, and racism underlying these narratives. By foregrounding the perspectives of characters who have been marginalized by these ideologies, *Mexican Gothic* reimagines American myths to include stories of those who have resisted and survived oppression. This perspective is crucial for a fuller understanding of American identity, as it acknowledges the complexities and contradictions inherent in the nation's history.

By blending Mexican cultural narratives, Gothic horror, and a critique of colonialism, *Mexican Gothic* exemplifies how modern literature is broadening the American literary canon. The novel challenges traditional definitions of what constitutes American literature, arguing for a more inclusive approach that recognizes the diverse voices and stories that contribute to the nation's cultural fabric. It encourages readers and scholars to look beyond a narrow, Eurocentric perspective and to appreciate the richness that comes from embracing multiple cultural influences. In this way, *Mexican Gothic* not only enriches the American literary canon but also reflects a broader movement towards a more equitable and representative understanding of literature and mythology in a globalized world.

By challenging traditional narratives and incorporating marginalized voices, *Mexican Gothic* and works like it are helping to redefine American literature for the 21st century. They remind us that American mythology is not static; it is a living, evolving tapestry woven from many different threads. As such, the broadening of the American literary canon through works like *Mexican Gothic* is not only necessary but also vital for understanding the complexities and diversities of the American experience today.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic* stands as a seminal work in the broadening of the American literary canon, illustrating how contemporary literature can challenge and expand traditional narratives. By integrating Mexican folklore, reinterpreting Gothic tropes, and critiquing colonial legacies, *Mexican Gothic* not only revitalizes the Gothic genre but also offers a profound reimagining of American mythology. Moreno-Garcia's work

demonstrates that American mythology is not confined to a singular, Eurocentric perspective but is a rich and evolving tapestry that includes multiple cultural narratives.

The novel's ability to blend Gothic horror with social critique underscores the genre's relevance in addressing contemporary issues and reimagining historical narratives. As such, *Mexican Gothic* serves as a powerful reminder that literature can and should reflect the full spectrum of human experience. Through works like *Mexican Gothic*, the American literary canon continues to evolve, embracing the diverse voices and stories that contribute to a richer, more nuanced understanding of American identity and culture.

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