



The Ghost in the Narrative – How Haunted Houses are Used in Gothic Literature

Across horror literature, the idea of the haunted house has been an iconic and long lasting one. In some cases, the house's danger comes from another entity, one separate from the house. In others, the house is itself the danger, and is itself malicious, to those inside the house or even those outside of it. These two examples can be contrasted across different works to exemplify the use of the haunted house as a trope and as a narrative device, one that extends beyond existence as a simple antagonistic use.

In Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic*, the house itself functions as an antagonist and character all on its own. In Robert Bloch's short story, *The Hungry House*, the house's nature is somewhat up for debate, though it is implied that the house itself may be an entity – due to the mushrooms and the Gloom - as well as containing the deceased human spirits within. In *The Hungry House*, the haunted house trope is both used and subverted in a similar manner. In this story, the house's state as an entity versus it being simply haunted by past residents is up for interpretation by the readers. It is unknown to the unnamed protagonist couple of the story whether the house has always been malicious, or if something had come to the house following their arrival; as they note in the second paragraph of the book, “it was there now. And there was nothing they could do.” (Bolch 322) In this way, the use of a house as a character in both stories is immediately set apart. Despite this difference, however, the house still remains equally

important in both stories, particularly with how the main characters of each decide to confront it themselves.

In *The Hungry House*, the two main characters both ignore the threat until it is impossible to do so. At first this is attributed to the desire to avoid upsetting one another due to “nerves” (Bloch 323) or blaming the instances on the light fixtures (Bloch 323). However, even as the incidents continue, neither communicate with each other as to what they are experiencing. “She wouldn’t tell him. He wouldn’t tell her, either.” (Bloch 324) - the two’s later deaths at the end of the story could have been avoided if they had communicated about the threat before it became out of control and immediately dangerous. This approach is countered in *Mexican Gothic*, in which the protagonist, Noemi, actively researches what is happening to her, what other peoples’ experience with the danger has been, and coordinates with her cousin and her friend in order to not only escape the house but prevent it and those within it to use their power to hurt others that would have come after her by destroying the house in its entirety. (Moreno-Garcia 297) This contrast offers an example as to how a haunted house, despite not being itself a character, is able to be an antagonistic figure for the main characters of the story. The house, as a subject of fear and uncertainty, forces the protagonists to exemplify how they respond when confronted with these things. As the house is a *thing* rather than a person or easily identifiable threat, the characters within the house are able to react in more ways than are available when confronting a living entity. In a similar vein, the house itself reacts to its residents in ways that are unique to the trope, as is exemplified by these two stories.

In *Mexican Gothic*, the house explicitly keeps its residents from leaving it. (Moreno-Garcia 227) This forces Noemi to work actively against its influence, even when its knowledge extends over its entire being. In *The Hungry House*, the house wants to keep other people outside

of it in the beginning, as one of the main characters notes when she is locked out of the house. (Bloch 323) However, at the end of the story, the house seems to be keeping them inside of it, even killing them when they attempt to leave. The houses in both of these stories want to keep their residents within; however, the outcome for the fates of the main characters is drastically different. Where *The Hungry House* ends with the deaths of the two main characters, *Mexican Gothic* ends with them alive and the house burnt to the ground. This, similarly to the way the houses force the main characters to show their response to threats, exemplifies how the characters use the tools available to them to escape the situation they are put into. Noemi in *Mexican Gothic* chooses to look at her surroundings with an open mind, changing her conclusions when presented with differing facts and doesn't tend to push her own feelings of danger aside, even when they may be irrational. She is a character who asks questions, and is then able to escape along with her friends because of her investigations into the house and its weaknesses – such as when she realizes the house's weakness to tincture and later uses it to attack Virgil. (Moreno-Garcia 262) In contrast with this, the main characters in *The Hungry House* are, as previously mentioned, in denial of the threat at first. Even when they attempt to combat the house at the end of the story, they do so clumsily and without the same thorough information gathering that Noemi goes through during the entirety of her stay at the house. They do not leave when the house first wants them too, and then, when it refuses to let them escape, they have no way to properly retaliate against it.

In these houses, the means used to attack and trap their victims are unique. In *The Hungry House*, this means is through both reflections – that of mirrors or otherwise – as well as the residents themselves. The house manifests itself through the reflections, such as that in the one seen in the window by the wife (Bloch 323), or that of the mirrors as seen by the house's

previous resident, Laura (Bloch 329), or even through the water of busted pipes (Bloch 331). In this way, the house acts as a narrative foil for its residents; it *reflects* them, and their deaths are seemingly caused by their own actions – for example, Laura with choosing to waste away near the mirrors, and the husband choosing to swing the wrench and subsequently attempt to escape through the broken window (Bloch 332).

In *Mexican Gothic*, however, the house has a number of different ways to trap and attack the people living inside of it. Firstly, the residents themselves keep each other in line. There is of course the head of the house, Howard Doyle, who is the one most in power and is connected to the house itself through the use of the Gloom. There is also Florence, who “runs the High Place” (Moreno-Garcia 22), putting her in a position of power over Catalina and Francis as well as Noemi herself. There is then Virgil, who is in a position of power over Noemi, as he harasses her in various ways across the book, such as when he confronts her while she is in sleeping clothes (Moreno-Garcia 119), or after the dream she has when she sleepwalks into his room (Moreno-Garcia 187). The residents of the house are trapped in it together, and keep each other in line – particularly Francis, who is Howard Doyle’s vessel for immortality. (Moreno-Garcia 273) In addition to the people themselves, the house is also filled with the mushrooms Howard Doyle uses for his long-lasting life, of which attach themselves to their hosts (in this case, the residents of the house) and enter into a symbiotic relationship with them. (Moreno-Garcia 211) These mushrooms are used by Howard Doyle for his own purposes; however, they themselves are feeding off of a past resident of the house, using her brain and body in order to form the Gloom. (Moreno-Garcia 284)

Speaking in a narrative sense, the house in *Mexican Gothic* and the house in *The Hungry House* use these different forms of “weapons” to harm and trap the protagonists in ways that

further the deeper themes in both stories, despite the fact that both of these stories are both using the classical “haunted house” trope. The reflections in *The Hungry House* are how the house’s entity manifests itself; the mirrors are also thematic of how the deaths of these characters happen as a result of their own actions or inaction. It becomes a reflection of them and their deeper flaws, such as Laura’s vanity or the main characters’ relationship and their lack of communication with one another. *The Mexican Gothic*’s mushrooms ensnare and trap the person they are growing out of, and they are the reason Noemi and the other residents are trapped at High Place as well. The house in each of these stories are tailored reflections of the narratives they are a part of, and these houses are used as a tool to explore the nature of the protagonists, good or bad, in a way that is unique to the haunted house trope and difficult to accomplish with a more human antagonist. These two stories exemplify the different uses that a haunted house can have within a story, and how this narrative device can be used to further the characters’ growth or explore how they might stagnate, under these specific, threatening circumstances.

Works Cited:

Moreno-Garcia, Silvia. *Mexican Gothic*. Del Rey, 2021.

Bloch, Robert. *The Hungry House*. 1951.