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Power at the Cost of Many

Once immersed in a world of glamor and parties, Noemi Taboada’s life is soon sent into irreparable havoc as she responds to a precarious letter from her newlywed older cousin in Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s novel, *Mexican Gothic.* Following the perspective of the elite socialite herself, Noemi finds herself in a corrupt and degenerating European-owned estate, High Place, in the secluded mountains of Mexico. Once owners of a thriving silver-mining business, the Doyles face the inevitable depletion of resources and the death of thousands of local miners, forcing the home into a dilapidated state filled with remnants of the past. Soon, Noemi finds herself falling victim to the gloom, a large mycelium network filled with memories of the living and dead alike, entrapping her in the tangled web and making her unable to leave. However, as a result, she begins to unravel the historic depth of the uncanny manor and its residents, finding the secrets to the Doyles’ bizarre colonialist practices. In following the symbolic references to silver, one can view the once notable wealth of High Place and the control they had over indigenous peoples in contrast with present-day degradation due to unsustainable extraction from colonialism. Throughout the novel, silver serves as a metaphor alluding to colonizers’ failed attempt to hide the injustices of imperialism and the everlasting implications hiding just beneath the surface.

Silver is upheld as one of the primary features of High Place, with hints of Doyle’s past wealth reminiscing in every corner of the property. Noemi takes notice of the precious metal almost immediately as a symbol of their prestige in the isolated highlands. When coming down for her first dinner shortly after arriving, Noemi examines the tableware, with “Cups and plates bearing the proud initials of their owners – the triumphant, stylized D of the Doyles. . . which might have once gleamed under the glow of the candles and now looked tarnished and dull” (27). Here, Noemi can appreciate the vast amount of silver features of High Place, but also take into account the visible neglect of upkeeping the silver’s quality. One of the many collections of customized heirlooms to represent the family’s prestigious business success now lays dormant without its shine. In coincidence with the fall of the silver mines, it appears silver now serves as a stark reminder of the family’s early colonial success and their possessiveness over what used to be. The practice of silver extraction deemed unsuitable for long-term success, reflecting many of the experiences of English colonists in their quest for richness. With the mines shut down and little money to spare, High Place is losing grip of its once-held prestige and dominance over the invaded land.

Concurring with the use of silver as a reminder of past wealth gone to ruins, silver further represents the enduring consequences of the Doyles’ exploitative practices. In learning more about the Doyles’ questionable history and methods of silver extraction, Noemi discovers just how far they were willing to go for their short-lived fortunes. Prior to their forced wedding, Francis reveals his uncle’s reasoning for journeying to Mexico after stripping England’s silver mines of its riches, as “‘Howard thought they’d ask fewer questions here [in Mexico], that he’d be able to do as he wished. . .” (244). By moving his business, Howard was able to continue his harsh and unethical means of production using Native workers, whom he deemed inferior and disposable from the start. Amidst this realization, Noemi considers how High Place, “. . . had been built atop bones. And no one had noticed such an atrocity, rows and rows of people streaming. . . into the mine, never leaving. Never to be mourned, never to be found” (244). Besides the grandeur loss of workers hurting the family’s business, the deaths of thousands are of little significance to the Doyles’ morale. Yet, to the country, the people, and the environment, the magnitudes of silver mining will be present for years to come. To the Doyles, silver brought forth great, but temporary prosperity, at the cost of thousands of lives never to be grieved.

Additionally, the act of cleaning silver is used as a reference to uncovering the hidden truth, unveiling the evil and corruptive nature of the Doyles. In an attempt to prove herself to the foreboding woman, Noemi offers to polish the astounding silver collection for Florence. Attending to every detail of the individualized possessions, Noemi reflects on her achievement, “. . . her eyes admiring the metal objects, almost reverently, [though she] had to admit it was a bit overwhelming to look at so many glittering riches on display. . . it seemed a pity they had all been locked away, dusty and forgotten” (113). Through the act of polishing the silver, Noemi reveals the once beautiful collection of the past, yet questions the purpose of holding such an assortment to never be fully appreciated. “What good were the mountains of silver if you didn’t use them? . . . the people of the town . . . had so little. They didn’t keep silver locked up in cabinets” (113). In wiping away several years’ worth of accumulated filth, Noemi can see the inherent greed of the Doyles. Having spent hours polishing the delicate metal otherwise left unnoticed and unappreciated, Noemi realizes their large assemblage symbolizes more than their wealth, but the perpetuation that others did not. The act of the Doyles owning so much silver meant the miners, despite having done all of the work, were left with nothing to show. Hoarding all the riches to themselves while witnessing the miners’ struggle just to survive. With few options for work in a mining-dominated town, Natives had no choice but to succumb to the Doyles’ imperialist tactics. Despite European colonialists’ growth in wealth and power, there is not enough money in the world to conceal their destructive tendencies and self-indulgence.

Furthering the notion of silver as a metaphor for exposing the Doyles’ dark history, Florence’s reflection reveals the underlying ugly nature of their past actions. Leaning over a serving tray, “Florence’s face, reflected on the silver surface, was elongated and deformed” (114-115). With the silver clean, it is able to reveal the true image of the Doyles. A family built from generations of incest, the Doyles are determined to perpetuate their deluded ideologies of white supremacy.

Overall, silver is used repeatedly throughout *Mexican Gothic* to highlight the hidden reality of the Doyles family and business practices. More generally, the symbolic element alludes to the continuous consequences of modern-day imperialism despite its often short-lived success. By first viewing the prevalence of silver within High Place, we were able to see the once notable wealth and prosperity of the Doyles. More importantly though, one can take notice of the visible depreciation of the silver treasures, hidden behind a cabinet to be neglected and rot away. Next, in learning the cruel and immoral treatment Howard imposed on the silver mine workers it becomes apparent of the lengths he is willing to go for his affluence with little regard for the implications. Manipulating thousands of Native workers into doing his dirty work costs them their lives and well-being yet meant nothing to the English colonist. Then, by examining the significance behind Noemi polishing the High Place’s silver collection, we are able to uncover their dark past hiding behind years of lies disguised as dust. The surplus of silver on display also represents Howard’s insurmountable greed, going great lengths to ensure control over the Natives. To keep so much silver for himself meant leaving next to nothing for the rest. Finally, Florence’s reflection in the newly cleaned silver tray depicts the ugliness behind the family’s lineage, her distorted features contrasting with the pureness of the metal itself. In the end, with the mines stripped of silver and the Doyles stripped of wealth, High Place and its inhabitants must now face its inevitable downfall. With the Natives now free of the colonists looming presence, one can hope that one day, they can reclaim their land and bring forth justice to the exploitation brought upon them.

Works Cited

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