

“El Monstruo de mi Cuarto”: A Discourse Analysis of Three Short Stories Revealing Domestic Violence and Child Abuse

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Received: 7 June 2023 ▪ Revised: 8 July 2023 ▪ Accepted: 12 July 2023

Abstract

During the first days of January 2023, newspapers in Colombia, Mexico, and other Latin American countries exploded with news about a viral story “El monstruo de mi cuarto”. This short story was the youth category winner from the 2022 “Medellin en 100 palabras” competition and it was massively shared on social media creating controversy. The story, short but powerful, spread awareness of a situation that a large number of children live in their household. In this paper, “el monstruo de mi cuarto” along with two more stories are analyzed in terms of their narrative structure and linguistic choices to identify the elements that make the story a strong piece of discourse that reveals experiences of domestic violence and child abuse. The findings suggest that vocabulary and the structural development of the texts were crucial to emphasize the intention of the stories.

Keywords: short stories, narrative analysis, domestic violence, sexual abuse, appraisal theory.

1. Introduction

“El monstruo de mi cuarto” gained special attention through social media at the beginning of this year. Newspapers published different articles about the viral moment that this short story had and its impact (Proaño, 2023, January 9; Jiménez, 2023, January 6; Ramírez, 2023, January 6; Moreno, 2023, January 6; Sánchez, 2023, January 7th). The short story reached millions of users online who were touched by the force of the words of Miguel Ángel López, a 15-year-old who won the youth category of “Medellín en 100 palabras”. This literary contest was created in 2001 in the city of Santiago de Chile. From that year, it expanded to other cities worldwide, such as Medellín and Bogotá, Colombia; Budapest, Hungary; and Puebla, Mexico. In Medellín, Colombia, the contest celebrated its fifth-year anniversary in 2022. The contest aims to promote the creation of short stories which are related to everyday life in those cities. The contest has three categories for different age groups: children (6-13 years old), youth (14-17 years old), and adults (18+). The best 100 short stories are published in a collective book shared publicly and freely.

In this paper, “El monstruo de mi cuarto” will be analyzed alongside two finalist stories. The first one is “Un monstruo humano” by 16-year-old Miguel Ángel Gómez Ossa (p. 113). The second one is “Ser *hombre*” by 17-year-old María Camila Mercado Ramirez (p. 121). Narrative analysis was used as the framework to explore what narrative and linguistic resources were used in these stories to portray experiences of child abuse and domestic violence. First, a literature

review of concepts such as domestic violence, machismo, child abuse, and appraisal theory is provided. After this section, the methodology and research questions, and an overview of narrative analysis is presented. Then, the data analysis procedure is described followed by the examination of the three short stories. This analysis and a discussion of the findings are provided. The last section includes a conclusion and final thoughts on the topic.

- Short stories use a range of linguistic resources to portray experiences of domestic violence.
- These linguistic resources can be metaphors, vocabulary, and the sequence of sentences.
- To construct experiences of violence these elements are used to create judgments and attitudes.
- These judgments and attitudes can be interpreted by the reader through understanding the story's context.
- These stories set in Latin America included implicit and direct instances of domestic violence.

2. Literature review

In this section, concepts such as domestic violence, machismo, child abuse, and appraisal theory will be discussed. These concepts are relevant to the analysis carried out in this paper.

2.1 *Domestic violence, machismo, and child abuse*

It is common to use the term domestic violence to talk about violent acts inside a home. The concept is “used in many countries to refer to partner violence but the term can also encompass child or elder abuse, or abuse by any member of a household (World Health Organization, 2012: 1). Therefore, domestic violence can be defined as a global term encompassing intimate partner abuse, violence against women, and child abuse.

The term intimate partner abuse refers to “the physical, sexual, and /or psychological abuse to an individual perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner” (Rodriguez, Bauer, McLoughlin & Grumbach, 1999: 468). These authors explain that despite being a gender-neutral concept, it is well-known that women are commonly the main victims of this type of violence. Violence against women “occurs in both developed and developing countries and regardless of the dominant religion or political ideology” (Wilson, 2014: 3). No matter the circumstances or the environment, violence against women is a worldwide problem. This type of violence is connected to concepts such as machismo. Machismo can be defined as “an ethos comprised of traits and behaviors prized by and expected of men in Latin countries” (Panitz, McConchie, Sauber & Fonseca, 1983: 35). These ideas are rooted in “traditional” family values and conceptions regarding men and women.

In Latin America, rigid gender roles “have in some cases given rise to negative patterns of couple interaction such as male dominance and domestic violence” (Heaton & Forste, 2008: 183). These gender roles as it was mentioned benefit men over women. Gender roles “are based on the different expectations that individuals, groups, and societies have of individuals based on their sex and based on each society's values and beliefs about gender” (Blackstone, 2003: 336). Women as housewives and the ones in charge of chores and work. Specifically, in Latin countries, women are expected to be “submissive, dependent, sexually faithful to their husbands, and are expected to take care of household needs and dedicate themselves entirely to their husbands and children” (Flake & Forste, 2006: 20). These beliefs can be one of the reasons why violence against women occurs in these contexts. Machismo and the superiority of men are concepts implied in these roles designated for women.

In Hispanic families, the influence of machismo on the dynamics of a household and the acceptance of these beliefs “encourage alcohol abuse by men” (Panitz et al., 1983: 31). The high rates of alcohol consumption and the presence of domestic violence are factors connected to child abuse. Widom and Hiller-Sturmhöfel (2001) write that “several studies have indicated that parental alcohol abuse may increase a child’s risk of experiencing physical or sexual abuse, either by a family member or by another person” (p. 56). In other words, machismo ideas promote high rates of alcohol consumption. At the same time, this leads to a high risk for children to suffer from abuse.

Child abuse is a complex phenomenon that has been difficult to define and delimitate (Santana-Tavira, Sánchez-Ahedo & Herrera-Basto, 1998; Wilczynski & Sinclair, 1999). The efforts to create a proper definition have influenced more attention toward research into this problem. As Santana-Tavira et al. (1998) explained, child abuse started to be defined as physically violent actions. After more research was conducted, the concept included psychological/emotional violence, negligence, and omission, and in general every action that affected a child’s integral development. For this study, the following maltreatment types were included: physical abuse, including corporal punishment, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse such as being witnesses or being exposed to other crimes such as domestic violence (Wilczynski & Sinclair, 1999).

Physical abuse is defined as “proscribed human actions that inflict pain on a child and are capable of causing injury or permanent impairment to development or functioning” (Finkelhor & Korbin, 1988: 8). The consequences of this type of violence are physical injuries such as bruises, fractures, etc. Another type of child abuse, sexual abuse can be conceptualized as a “variety of abusive behaviors, ranging from fondling or touching to sodomy, incest, or rape” (Widom & Hiller-Sturmhöfel, 2001: 52) between “an adult and a sexually immature child for purposes of the adult’s sexual gratification” (Finkelhor & Korbin, 1988: 8). Both forms of violence against children have severe consequences for their development in every area of their life. From the physical injuries to the emotional impact. The aftermath of sexual abuse “appears to stem from the social stigma, the powerlessness of a child in the face of sexual aggression by a parent, and the betrayal of the child at the hands of one of her most crucial caretakers” (Finkelhor & Korbin, 1988: 11). The first aspect can be linked to the tendency of the strong and powerful against the vulnerable and weak. While the second aspect is the heartbreaking reality of most victims of child abuse. Parents, family, home, should be the place where children shall happily develop in a safe space.

The situation in Latin America is somehow critical in terms of violence outside and inside the family context. Flake and Forste (2006) argue that “with so much attention centered on Latin America’s corruption, crime, and political instability, it is easily overlooked that the family is perhaps this region’s most violent social institution” (p. 19). The painful reality is that the place where family members should feel the most secure is actually the most dangerous place for women and children.

2.2 Appraisal theory

Appraisal theory has been described as an “effective framework for analyzing attitudes expressed and interpersonal meanings” in different types of discourse including literary works (Wei, Wherrity & Zhang, 2015: 235). Literary texts such as stories and tales can have characteristics that make them unique forms of expression. Compared with argumentative texts, stories are different in terms of “the persuasive intent of messages that rely on arguments and evidence is usually transparent to audiences, but the precise intent of stories may be substantially more opaque” (Berger, Ha & Chen, 2019: 303). Therefore, the interpretation of the message of a story is more complex to decipher. There are no explicit words telling the writer’s intention and the beliefs and ideas of the authors tend to stay behind the lines.

Appraisal is an umbrella term used to “refer to the semantic resources including words, phrases, and structures that speakers or writers employ to negotiate emotions, judgments, and valuations” (Wei, Wherrity & Zhang, 2015: 235). Authors use these tools to convey messages through text to an audience. The focus on interpersonal meanings permits the interpretation of “the subjective presence of writers/speakers in texts as they adopt stances towards both the material they present and those with whom they communicate” (Martin & White, 2005: 1). Therefore, the analysis of the stories involves the writer’s stance and the intended audience. This model considers three main concepts, attitude, graduation, and engagement. Attitude refers to the evaluative meaning through which speakers/writers take a positive or negative stance, and it can be divided into three subcategories, affect, judgement, and appreciation (Fortanet-Gomez, 2022). Graduation can be defined as an evaluative tool that gradates the meaning of terms by using adjectives or other parts of speech to strengthen or weaken, and it can be divided in subcategories such as force and focus (Korenek & Šimko, 2014). Engagement, the third component of the model, refers to the “attitudes and the play of voices around opinions in discourse” (Wei, Wherrity & Zhang, 2015: 236). All these three components are expressed in stories through linguistic resources.

3. Methodology

This section will present a rationale for the methodological aspects of this study. These components are the research questions, the procedure, and the method for the analysis. This last aspect was narrative analysis.

3.1 Research questions

The research questions that delimit the scope of this study were:

How are linguistic elements used in short stories to portray experiences of domestic violence and child abuse?

What do these stories reveal about the social context where these short stories are embedded?

Therefore, this paper aims to provide answers to these two research questions through narrative analysis. The next section presents an overview of the method for the analysis and the procedure.

3.2 Narrative analysis

In 1967, Labov and Waletzky developed a model to analyze narratives based on seven components. They based these components on the idea that narratives were constructed by two types of clauses, referential and evaluative. Referential clauses are related to “what the story is about: events, characters, setting; whereas evaluative clauses are connected to “why the narrator is telling the story and why the audience should listen to it” (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015: 153). These two types of sentences create a story by intertwining elements to organize and give structure to the story and the evaluative components connected to appraisal theory.

The seven elements of the framework are orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution and coda. These are defined as follows by Labov (1972):

Abstract: It is the summary of the events and the introductory part of the narrative.

Orientation: It refers to the scene setting where the people, time, and place are stated.

Complication: This refers to the actual events of the narrative or the occurrences that move it ahead. Complicating actions may be physical actions.

Evaluation: It can be defined as the point, or reason, why the narrative is being told, and it can be done in a number of ways (internal or external).

Resolution: Outcome, result, resolution. At this point, the narrator indicates that the story has come to a close, and that a final action has occurred.

Coda: Labov explains that the narrator points out the relevance of the story by connecting it with everyday life, or with other events or actions that fall outside the story frame.

3.2.1 Procedure

The three short stories were examined through narrative analysis. The stories were divided by the components of the narrative framework. Then, the three stories were contrasted to identify common themes or patterns among the stories. After this examination, literary interpretation was employed. This concept requires the interpreter to “delve deep into a literary piece and bring out to consideration not only the superficial or literal aspects but also ponder over the underlying concepts” (Irshad & Ahmed, 2015: 28). This concept was used to improve the analysis of the stories in terms of their underlying meanings and ideas.

4. Analysis and discussion of results

In this section, the findings from the analysis will be discussed. First, the discussion will be divided into the three stories examined in this paper. Second, three themes will be presented to describe some patterns and emergent themes from the stories.

4.1 *El monstruo de mi cuarto*

The story begins by presenting the location of the house of the protagonist: “*Mi casa queda en una loma cerca de la estación Andalucía. Allí vivimos tres personas. Mi mamá, El monstruo y yo*”. This is the orientation component of the story where the characters are introduced and the attention is drawn to this mysterious being, the monster. The complication is the longest part of this story. The first sentence of this component explains what happens when the protagonist goes to sleep, “*Cada vez que me voy a dormir puedo ver que en la esquina de mi habitación se para el monstruo para verme mientras duermo*”. It is common to say that monsters like the darkness of bedrooms and they appear specially when one is alone. The second sentence states: “*Me da miedo que me haga algo mientras no puedo verlo, puedo sentir su mirada más y más profunda, como si sus intenciones se escucharan a gritos*”. The protagonist is expressing a negative feeling explicitly while saying that he/she is scared. Then this is reinforced by the following clauses. The first one says that he/she can “feel” the monster’s gaze as it stares. The second one is connected to the previous and stating that the monster’s intentions can be “heard” as if it was screaming. With these ideas, the feeling of being scared by the monster is emphasized based on the descriptions of the monster’s behavior and the use of metaphors. The resolution is composed by this sentence: “*Le he puesto varios nombres, El monstruo, El vigilante, El coco y muchos otros*”. The protagonist uses these different names to describe this mysterious person. A monster is a scary being who commonly appears in nightmares and a vigilante is watchful. *El Coco* is a man with a bag that appears at night and takes children who do not go to sleep early or have bad behavior (Guillaumin, 2023, June 5). The protagonist judges this person negatively with these names, based on his appearance maybe as being large, ugly, or scary; and based on his behavior as someone who is watchful, and that appears at night. In the coda, the last sentence is “*Pero mi*

mamá le dice amor”. In contrast, the mother judges this person positively. By calling this person *love*, she indicates that maybe she is not aware of what is happening, or she might be ignoring it.

This story is written in the present tense. Throughout all the clauses, the experience narrated in the story is introduced as routinary in the life of the protagonist. These aspects contributed to the viral moment of the story. Social media users who read the story interpreted its message to be a call for help from a victim of child sexual abuse. People argued and called the authorities to investigate the life of the story’s author to find out if he wrote the story based on his own experience (Flores, 2023, January 10; Proaño, 2023, January 9; Cárdenas, 2023, January 13; Gómez, 2023, January 7; Arévalo, 2023, January 8). The author had to declare that he was not a victim of sexual abuse and that he was inspired to write the story from the experiences of some friends.

4.2 *Un monstruo humano*

The second story sets the context in the orientation as follows: “*En un día normal y corriente, seguía mi rutinaria vida normal, buscándome el pan entre las frías calles de Medellín*”. The protagonist of this story values this specific day as normal and not extraordinary. He/she describes the beginning of this story as his/her routine in the city. Then, the complication component of the story presents that “*La gente me mira raro, me dice «monstruo» y me reclama disculpas el barrio por la muerte de mi padre, el único relojero*”. The protagonist judges the behavior of the people as weird and unusual because they call him/her a monster. He/she then introduces another important aspect which is the death of his/her father. After this segment, the evaluation is constructed in the following way, “*Me pregunto entonces dónde estaban cuando la botella desataba el verdadero monstruo dentro de mi padre, no existía temor mayor que aquel habitando mis ojos, ni mayor valentía que aquella en mis puños,*”. He/she asks where these people that call him monster were when his/her dad was drunk. The protagonist judges the behavior of his/her dad as negative by describing his/her father’s acting as a consequence of alcohol. The behavior of his/her father is judged as the real monster. The protagonist expresses being scared and brave but the fact that he/she does not state it explicitly, reinforces the message through the metaphors. The resolution is composed by the last sentences, “*no me arrepiento de lo que hice ¿Por qué debería disculparme por ser un monstruo? ¿Acaso alguien me pidió disculpas por convertirme en uno?*”. He/she directly declares that he/she does not regret what he did. This means that he/she judges his/her behavior as positive and correct. This attitude is emphasized with the two finishing sentences. He/she argues that there is no reason for him to be apologetic about being a monster because no one apologized to him for transforming him into one. The protagonist is referring to the people who called him monster because of the death of his/her dad without knowing what happened at his/her house.

The experience portrayed in this story contains elements that could be interpreted as physical child abuse caused by an alcoholic father. There is no mention of another member of the family, but the situation indirectly suggests that the child lived with a father alone. The child can be possibly a man because he dared to physically fight his father and survive. This story highlights the role of society in cases of domestic abuse. This connects to one of the consequences of the experience for the protagonist, as he claims to have become a monster himself. This could refer to the fact that he was involved in his father’s death or that he has become an alcoholic as a consequence of the experience.

4.3 *Ser “hombre”*

The third story introduces the conflict of the story in the orientation, “*Tu hermano y mi madre discutían con frecuencia, tu hermano decía que el estar conmigo te volvía débil, dócil,*

completamente inútil.” In this segment, the mother of the protagonist and her possible partner’s brother are introduced as constantly fighting. She describes how her partner’s brother judges their couple relationship, especially the behavior of his brother as a result of being with the protagonist. The words used to describe his behavior are weak, docile, and useless. These words are negative judgments connected to the next segment of evaluation. It continues as “*¿cómo era posible que jugaras con muñecas y me ayudarás con labores de la casa? «No actúa como un hombre», repitió en varias ocasiones*”. The negative adjectives are strengthened by the brother’s claims that the protagonist’s partner is not “acting like a man” because he plays with dolls and helps with the house chores. In the evaluation, the protagonist expresses her ideas directly by challenging the idea of what her partner’s brother thinks about what a man is, “*Pero ¿qué era actuar como hombre? ¿Era entrar a mi habitación a medianoche y despojarme de mi ropa como hacía papá? ¿O golpear a mamá como hacía mi hermano?*”. Her last two sentences explicitly state instances of child sexual abuse and domestic violence.

This story emphasizes how gender roles and machismo ideas are connected to domestic violence and child sexual abuse. The author gives examples of behavior that are expected from women but not for men, such as playing with dolls and doing house chores. The brother of the protagonist’s partner holds these ideas of men as being opposite to weak, docile, and useless. His judgment of his brother’s behavior implicitly shows machismo thoughts. The finishing sentences are explicit declarations of child sexual abuse from the protagonist’s father and domestic violence towards her mother from her brother.

4.4 *The stories and the Latin American context*

In the first two stories, *El monstruo de mi cuarto* and *un monstruo humano*, the authors portrayed experiences of child sexual abuse and child physical abuse without explicitly stating it in the text. Throughout the narrative structure, the authors used resources such as metaphors, vocabulary, grammatical tense, and first-person voice, to convey the story. The narrative structures followed a similar pattern. The plot of the story is understood as the story unfolds. The message grows sentence by sentence and concludes with the most impactful lines in the last stages of the narrative framework. In this sense, interpretation plays a relevant role in short stories. Short story writers need to be precise with the organization of sentences and the selection of words that aid in the portrayal of the experience they focus on. According to what was analyzed, the stages of the narrative follow an accumulative effect where the understanding of the story occurs until the last sentence of the short story.

In this way, every word and sentence written is valuable for the interpretation of the whole message of the story. The analysis of the three short stories involved the following consideration, “understanding literary works may be dependent on cultural contexts which are not found in the text” (Altikriti, 2011: 1374). The three short stories were contextualized and intended for a Latin American audience. The experiences expressed directly and indirectly showed the complex situations that happen in Latin American countries. Domestic violence and child abuse are made visible through these stories.

5. Conclusions

The results of this analysis can conclude that the linguistic elements used in short such as metaphors and vocabulary are used to construct judgments and attitudes. The construction of these interpersonal meaning elements is used to strengthen the experiences of domestic abuse. These experiences are implicitly and sometimes directly expressed in the texts. Furthermore, the organization of the sentences in the different narrative elements of the story creates an accumulative effect through which the victims’ story gains more impact. These aspects concrete

the portrayal of domestic violence and child abuse as the intention of the writer is interpreted by the intended audience and readers. It can also be concluded that understanding the context where the stories are set is crucial for the analysis and interpretation of short stories.

Lastly, it is important to highlight the role that this kind of story can have in promoting awareness of social problems such as domestic violence, and child sexual and physical abuse.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Dra. Alejandra Nuñez Asomoza for her patience and feedback in the development of this article. University of Guanajuato and CONAHCYT as well for their institutional support to my educational journey.

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The authors declare no competing interests.

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