



“A Dense and Maddening Dream”: Horror and Domesticity in the Stories of Amparo Davila

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Received: 7 June 2022 ▪ Revised: 17 July 2022 ▪ Accepted: 31 July 2022

Abstract

Amparo Dávila is considered one of the most prolific Mexican horror writers of the 20th century. Her literary techniques have been compared to some of the most famous horror writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Franz Kafka. However, her writing is indicative of further social orders present in Mexican culture and other spaces. In this study, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is implemented as an approach to analyze how horror in two short stories is used to reflect Mexican and American social issues. The findings suggest that there is a critique on the social order in societies by transforming these encounters into horrifying experiences.

Keywords: discourse analysis, domesticity, femininity, horror, literature.

1. Introduction

Amparo Dávila is a Mexican horror writer who was born in Pinos, Zacatecas in 1928. She was an avid reader due to her father's extensive library. At the age of seven, she moved with her family to San Luis Potosí. Dávila's entry into the literary world began when she published two poetry books in 1950 and 1954 (Schneider, 1991). She won the coveted literary award Xavier Villaurrutia in 1977 (Pitol, 1996). Amparo Dávila continued to be involved in the academic and literary world until her death in 2020.

Dávila is an essential figure in Mexican literature (Batis, 1964). This is because she is considered to be one of the most original horror writers in the literary tradition (Schneider, 1991). Additionally, she is one of the few female writers that was considered prolific during her time (Pitol, 1996). She is a writer from the 20th century whose work is mainly focused on short stories. There has been much analysis regarding her work through a feminist lens (Bianchini, 2009; Borgia, 2009; Martinez, 2008). Seminal work conducted by Borgia (2009) explores the use of ghosts and supernatural beings to critique and subvert gender roles. Furthermore, Pitol (1996) discusses how her prose intersects and plays with the genre of fantastic literature. In addition, critics discuss the marvel of her universe of unexpected situations that stem from reality but become sinister and inhabitable (Enríquez, 2022; Pitol, 1996). Although Dávila did not write extensively, she continues to be considered one of the finest figures that Mexican literature has to offer (Enríquez, 2022; Pitol, 1996; Schneider, 1991).

In this paper, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is employed to explore the horror elements Dávila uses to critique aspects of Mexican society that extend to other spaces. In order

to conduct the analysis, I will first provide a literature review of key concepts such as *machismo*, prevailing gender roles, and feminism. Then, I present the methodology and research questions along with an overview of CDA. Furthermore, I will describe the procedure followed for this analysis. Next, a linguistic analysis of two short stories will be carried out to elucidate social orders of Mexican society and gender roles. Finally, a conclusion on the topic will be offered.

2. Literature review

In this section, the main concepts which integrate the theoretical framework of this paper will be discussed: Mexican *machismo* or chauvinism, Mexican gender roles, and feminism and Amparo Dávila.

2.1 Mexican *machismo*

The discussion of the term *machismo* is considered complex and dynamic; furthermore, its definition is the subject of much controversy and ambiguity (Arciniega et al., 2008). However, a basic definition of the term may still be provided for the purposes of this paper. In general, the concept is associated with negative sexist behaviors of men and hypermasculinity (Anders, 1993; Ingoldsby, 1991). Some of the characteristics of *machismo* include negative aspects such as violent, sexualized behaviors, and drinking problems (Alaniz, 1996; Beaver et al., 1992; Neff et al., 1991). In Mexican or Latino culture, *machismo* involves the domination of men over women; women are regarded by men in traditional roles such as rearing children and serving men (Arciniega et al., 2008). Furthermore, *machismo* is strongly associated with aggressive and violent manners.

This paper will focus on the term as considered in the mid-20th century when the stories were written and take place. It is in this context where *machismo* implies the following characteristics and understanding of society according to Daros (2014):

- a. A social position of physical and psychological superiority of men over women;
- b. as complement of the previous point, a de-evaluative attitude towards women's capacities; and, in consequence,
- c. a discriminatory attitude towards women in the social, work, and legal field. In this way, women occupy a subordinate role and serves domestic and sexual needs.¹

In other words, a society where *machismo* is deeply ingrained depends on the subservience of women in favor of men. Although the 20th century signals the beginning of female autonomy and subversion of gender roles, domestic work continues to be assigned to women (Daros, 2014). Furthermore, Daros (2014) explains that the position of the woman in the household continues, and they must carry the majority of the household tasks. These traditional expectations within the home also imply motherhood and its responsibilities. While some women resign themselves to uptake this, others consider this unpleasant and find that the position of their male partners is enviable and straightforward in comparison to their own (Daros, 2014).

The manner in which Mexican *machismo* enables men's violent and aggressive behaviors further perpetuates traditional gender norms in Mexican society. In addition, this also serves to subjugate and oppress women into subservient positions in favor of men. It may be said that *machismo* validates the patriarchal standards to which Mexican society subscribes to.

¹ Original in Spanish. Translation by author of this article.

2.2 Mexican gender roles and feminism

Arellano (2003) clarifies the differences between sex and gender. According to this author, sex refers to a biological category and gender to a social construction that differentiates between men and women. Furthermore, these gender differences include expectations and values, power differences, and subordination to one gender from another.

In Mexican society, stereotypes about men and women are deeply rooted in the culture; stereotypes refer to a cluster of beliefs about characteristics such as femininity for women and masculinity for men (Montes de Oca et al., 2013). According to Magally (2011), these stereotypes are perpetuated until they become gender roles. In Mexico, researchers have concluded that the stereotypes and gender roles are ingrained into the culture and society (Chia et al., 1994; Gibbons et al., 1991; Lara-Cantu, 1989). Lara-Cantu (1989) explains the following common gender roles and traditions in Mexican culture: (1) male-to-male relationships are characterized by *machismo* in the form of extreme aggressiveness; (2) male-to-female relationships with *machismo* characteristics such as sexual aggression and contempt; (3) Mexican women possess dependent and submissive traits.

Regarding this last role, Lara-Cantu (1989) describes the female gender role as self-sacrificing because as mothers, they are expected to make sacrifices for their family. Some of these sacrifices include giving up their education, careers, and a social life in favor of their family and children (Martin, 1989). Contrastingly, men and fathers are expected to economically provide for the family, but they are allowed to play a minimal role in making the family function (Schmitz & Diefenthaler, 1989). In other words, women are expected to bear children and sacrifice their lives and goals to focus on their children and husband. However, men are given economic power and responsibilities that extend only to economic sustenance; their goals, education, and social life do not suffer in the same manner.

Nevertheless, the Mexican feminist movement emerged in the 1970's and began to question the gender roles described above (Lugo, 1985; Marcos, 1999; Morgan, 1985). According to Marcos (1999), this movement reflected the demands of the western waves of feminism. Mexican feminism aimed to unmask the sexist double standards in terms of sexuality, requesting abortion rights, and challenging traditional gender norms such as a woman's identity characterized by marriage and a maternal role (Marcos, 1999). In the following section, feminism will be approached from the context of Dávila's work.

2.3 Feminism and Amparo Dávila: The female gothic

Gothic as a literary term has existed since the 18th century. It is widely accepted that "The Castle of Otranto" (1764) was the first classic gothic novel. Gothic initially referred to the medieval world and dark passions in juxtaposition with the gothic castle; however, as Childs and Fowler (2006) explain, this definition had shifted to the implication of evil forces and ghostly apparitions by the end of the 18th century. Furthermore, Childs and Fowler (2006) discuss the basic characteristics of a gothic tale: a setting that consists of castles, monasteries, or ruined homes; characters that embody good and evil; sanity and chastity are threatened; the suggestion that irrational and evil forces threaten individual integrity and social order.

In addition to this initial term, other ramifications of gothic literature have appeared since its origin in the 18th century. The concept of the female gothic first appeared in 1976 in the work of Ellen Moers titled "Literary Women". Moers defined the term as literary work written by women since the 18th century in the gothic tradition. According to Williams (1995), there is a lack of consensus about the differences between female and male gothic; it is unclear if the differences lie in techniques, plot, uses of paranormal elements, etc. Amparo Davila, the author of the stories analyzed in this paper, is considered to follow the tradition of the female gothic in the 20th century;

in her work, it is customary for female characters to be trapped in domestic spaces in a wide variety of contexts such as rural and cosmopolitan (Horner & Zlosnik, 1998).

Wisker (2004) suggests that literary work in the female gothic uses defamiliarization of roles and expectations of female lives as a technique. Defamiliarization occupies a significant role in gothic literature. This term is known in literary criticism as ominous or *unheimlich*. The term was first explored in literary criticism by Sigmund Freud in 1919. According to Freud, that which is ominous has two faces: the first is that which is familiar and the second is secret and hidden. In other words, it is a paradox of something which was considered known but becomes unfamiliar and threatening; an experience of *déjà vu* is often cited as an example of something ominous or *unheimlich* (Errazuriz, 2001). Therefore, the female gothic is characterized by the approach of topics and themes that are considered for women such as domesticity, motherhood, etc. However, these female roles and expectations are defamiliarized to give an ominous effect and explore how horror is intrinsic in these roles.

Frouman-Smith (1989) cites Amparo Dávila as a representative of the gothic literary tradition. In her seminal work on Dávila, Frouman-Smith explains that the female characters in these stories are trapped in gender roles imposed by a patriarchal system. Therefore, the space and gender norms the characters confined in also function as a horror element in the gothic style of Amparo Dávila.

3. Methodology

In this section, the methodology for analysis of these texts will be described. First, the research questions for undertaking this analysis will be explained. A CDA approach was undertaken to conduct this analysis. In specific terms, the two short stories were analyzed using CDA and exegetical interpretation which is discussed below in procedure.

3.1 Research questions

The objective for this analysis is to depict the horror elements that exist in two short stories by Amparo Dávila and how these reflect traditional gender roles in society. Therefore, the research questions for this paper are the following:

1. What are the horror elements related to traditional gender roles in Amparo Dávila's short stories?
2. What do these elements reflect about Mexican and American societies in the 20th century?

I now approach the analysis that will be conducted out by employing CDA which will be further explained below.

3.2 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

According to Wodak and Meyer (2001), CDA is a cross-discipline which emerged in the early 1990's through the work of scholars such as van Leeuwen, Kress, van Dijk, and Fairclough. Additionally, critical discourse analysis is regarded as an approach with an interdisciplinary nature (Amoussou & Allagbe, 2018; Bloor & Bloor, 2007). This implies that this approach may be used in a variety of areas and fields including literary analysis.

Van Dijk (2003) explains that CDA is characterized by several components instead of subscribing to a specific definition. Some of these characteristics are: CDA focuses on social issues,

power relations are found in discourse, discourse forms society and culture, discourse does ideological work, discourse is found in history, the intersection between texts and society are mediated, discourse analysis is interpretative, and discourse is social action (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 2003). Therefore, work in this area will approach notions such as “power, dominance, hegemony, ideology, class, gender, race, discrimination, interests, reproduction, institutions, social structure, and social order, besides the more familiar discourse analytical notions” (p. 354). In this analysis, the topics to be discussed will be power, gender, and social order. In the following section, the analytical procedure will be explained.

3.2.1 Procedure

The procedure for the analysis of these short stories was carried out through exegesis. This term refers to “a critical explanation of a text” (Krauth, 2002). This concept originally referred to critical interpretation of religious texts but has since been extended to literary work. Through exegesis, salient themes and elements in these two stories were identified and interpreted according to a CDA framework. In other words, the literary topics and details were critically deciphered in order to relate them to social aspects of Mexican gender norms, and their reproduction and critique of social orders in Mexico.

4. Analysis and discussion of results

4.1 *El huésped* (1959)²

This story was published in *Tiempo destrozado* in 1959. In this book, an unnamed woman tells the story of a mysterious houseguest her husband invites into their home. Ironically, the husband is never around the guest because he works long hours. The head of the household is left alone with her young children, the maid, and her young child. This guest is described by the narrator as sinister, with big yellow eyes and no eyelids. This being invades and threatens their lives while the husband accuses the wife of being hysterical and delusional because she fears his guest. Finally, she and the maid decide to take matters into their own hands when the guest attacks one of the children. They devise a plan which will deprive the being of air, light, and sustenance; it is this plan that finally kills him and frees them from his presence.

4.2 *Arthur Smith* (1961)³

Arthur Smith is a short story published in the book *Música concreta* in 1961. This narration tells the tale of Mrs. Smith who becomes worried when her husband, Arthur Smith, breaks his daily routine by refusing to drink coffee and read *The Financial Times*. While he leaves for work, Mrs. Smith dedicates herself to domestic life including caring for the children, grocery shopping, and leisurely activities. During her day, she continues to reflect on the oddity of her husband deviating from his routines. However, before dinner, she discovers that her husband has been playing marbles all day in the backyard with the children. Upon this discovery, she despairingly realizes that she now must care for three children instead of two because Arthur Smith appears to have horrifyingly reverted to a mental childlike state. The context of this story is unclear as are her reasons for writing it. It is clear that the characters are not Mexican due to their

² The complete short story may be found at the following link:

<http://www.materialdelectura.unam.mx/images/stories/pdf5/amparo-davila-81.pdf>.

³ The complete short story may be found at the following link:

<https://www.revistadeluniversidad.mx/download/6042a11f-9534-4697-84bc-f5a9d1996b53?filename=arthur-smith>.

names. Furthermore, this story describes spaces which at the time were more common to American culture such as the office as a workspace and the theater as entertainment. However, it is clear that these gender roles expand to contexts and societies outside of Mexican culture. The use of a seemingly American family is commentary on the social order which is reproduced in other countries.

4.3 *Self-sacrificing women*

In both of these stories, the traditional norm of self-sacrificing women in society can be observed. In *Arthur Smith*, Mrs. Smith spends the entirety of her day dedicated to domestic affairs such as childcare, housework, grocery shopping and cooking. While Arthur leaves early to fulfill his role as the sole economic provider of the home, she is required to devote her entire day to her family. A scene in this story additionally reflects the gender norm of the sacrifice a woman must commit in order to submit to domestic affairs. In this scene, Mrs. Smith goes grocery shopping and encounters several of her housewife friends. They gossip and discuss how Emily, a friend, is divorcing: “Although it could not be denied that Emily at times would neglect the house and did not serve Harry very well. And some days, when he arrived from the office, there was no food and Emily was at the Warren’s playing poker”⁴ (p. 91).

The excerpt above presents a reflection of the expectations the social order has of women whereas a man may have careers and social lives while women are subservient and their role is only within the home (Lara-Cantu, 1989; Schmitz & Diefenthaler, 1989). Following this theme, *El huésped* also exemplifies this norm of the woman sacrificing her social life in favor of her husband and children.

In *El huésped*, it is riveting to note the husband is only home when he brings this strange guest into the house. He is said to be away at work or on business trips: “he arrived really late. He once said he had a lot of work. I think that other things kept him too...”⁵ (p. 39). Again, the husband is free to pursue a career and travel, while the wife spends her day in the house. Additionally, while she has a maid, the wife describes a series of chores during the day that she must carry out to ensure the house is in order.

It is improbable that Dávila is attempting to keep the social order in place. As Frouman-Smith has clarified, the women in her stories are trapped not in a physical space but in their gender roles. Furthermore, this entrapment functions as a horror element where the protagonists cannot escape from the norms imposed upon them by the patriarchal system. In the next section, the entrapment of a physical space will be approached.

4.4 *Trapped domesticity*

Besides the entrapment in patriarchal gender norms, the women in these two stories are trapped in physical spaces that are related to domesticity. In *Arthur Smith*, Mrs. Smith appears to leave her home to continue focusing on tasks related to the house. While she gossips with her friends at the supermarket, she mentions one instance where she has left the house with her husband to see a play. This is told in an almost secretive manner because it seems the theater piece was somewhat daring. After this, she recalls that that weekend at mass, the reverend appeared to direct his sermon to them when he warned against “dangerous and censurable spectacles” (p. 92). This also reflects the role the church plays in maintaining social orders.

⁴ Excerpt translated by author, original in Spanish.

⁵ Original in Spanish.

As mentioned in the literature review, Dávila's horror technique does not only give a sense of despair by physically trapping her protagonists, but also serves as a critique of the role women serve. By highlighting the condition of Mrs. Smith, she discusses the sinister aspects of obligatorily existing in one physical space for a lifetime.

El huésped reveals an analogous situation for the unknown protagonist; in the opening lines, she describes her life as follows: "We had been married for almost three years, we had two children and I was unhappy. We lived in a small town, uncommunicated and distant from the city. A town that was almost dead or on the brink of disappearing" (p. 37). The protagonist lives uncommunicated from a larger city in a depressing town. Furthermore, during the entire story, she does not leave the house because of her domestic obligations and because of the strange houseguest her husband has invited into her home. Additionally, she is trapped in this domestic space which becomes torturous when she must serve this being as well. Besides navigating her ordinary chores, she must now feed and serve this hostile presence in her home.

Once again, Dávila uses the *unheimlich* or defamiliarization technique to give a sinister effect and explore how horror is intrinsic in the gender role the protagonist of *El huésped* must continue to represent. Part of the terror in this story is that she is trapped in a domestic environment where she is expected to serve her home. In addition, her role as a housewife and mother must remain stable even in the face of a sinister and threatening being. This is reflective of gender roles in Mexican society where the woman must remain in the home and her identity continues to be that of a homemaker regardless of her circumstances (Martin, 1989).

However, it may be argued that the most vital enactor of these gender roles described above is the patriarchal society that is deeply rooted in Mexico. In the following section, *machismo* and the looming threat of the male presence is analyzed in these two stories.

4.5 *The horrifying male presence: Machismo*

As previously mentioned, the term *machismo* implies the domination men have over women. Because of *machismo*, women are seen by men as individuals who live to serve men and have children (Arciniega et al., 2008). In *Arthur Smith*, Mr. Smith has only financial responsibilities in the household. The role of Mrs. Smith is to maintain the entire functioning of the family. However, he is not her equal, as she must also take care of him as she does for her children. In the story, it is explained that she cooks and feeds her children as well as her husband. This seemingly normal patriarchal expectation becomes sinister when she makes the terrifying discover that her husband is now a child:

Without saying another word, because of the lump in her throat, the woman turned and walked to the house, completely destroyed, as if she had suddenly fallen into a dense and maddening dream, which dulled her reason and shook her soul. She could not think of anything or any explanation and only wished ardently to wake from that cruel nightmare she was trapped in. The children and Arthur Smith entered the kitchen behind her and sat at the table.

"I don't have any food," Arthur Smith lamented when he saw only two sets of cutleries, "I haven't been served my food," he repeated desolately, and thick tears rolled down his cheeks. Mrs. Smith leaned on the stove to keep her balance. She felt, at moments, that she would collapse, that everything spun around her, and that enormous pain ripped through her. A drowned sob shook her body. She knew she had lost Arthur Smith, that in front of her, seated at the table, there were three children. (p. 94)

The presence of Arthur Smith is equated with that of a child in an eerie manner. Since Arthur Smith is served by Mrs. Smith as one of her children, he mentally becomes a real child. The

husband, which was once a familiar element of Mrs. Smith’s life, is defamiliarized to emphasize the parts each of them play in the social order. Mrs. Smith assembles the family and ensures its function, while Arthur’s role is that of a helpless child. Once again, Dávila uses horror elements to expose the power relations and differences between men and women in Mexican society. Additionally, this reflects how Mexico is widely considered to be sexist and patriarchal while the same impositions occur in American society. This is important to note due to the perceptions Western society has about Mexico while their societies and culture perpetuate the same social orders.

In *El huésped*, a comparable technique is used to discuss patriarchal impositions on women. First, it is necessary to intervene and explain that there is much discussion over what the houseguest actually is. There is no consensus as to what this eerie figure represents in this story. However, using CDA, it may be interpreted that this guest represents a *machista* masculine presence in the home. To make this interpretation, it is useful to consider that the protagonist of this story describes that she was in an unhappy marriage and “represented something as a piece of furniture for her husband, that you become accustomed to seeing in a determined space, but that does not cause the least impression”⁶ (p. 37).

She has an unhappy marriage where her husband does not care about her or the home. Additionally, it is compelling to note that the husband brings this presence into the house where she and the maid reside with the children. Furthermore, she explains that while she thought of leaving the house, she had no money or means of communicating with any loved ones. Once again, the discourse is present and the economic power men have over women in Mexican society may be observed in this story. Additionally, this houseguest leaves the maid alone but stalks the wife and terrorizes her almost exclusively. This may be representative of the implied power her husband and his patriarchal presence has over her even in his absence. This being has complete power over her life and has trapped her within the home; an interpretation may be given based on these elements and conclude that Dávila attempts to use horror to reflect the innate horror in the patriarchal system and imposition of gender roles.

5. Conclusions

The results of this analysis conclude that the horror elements in Dávila’s short stories are reflective of the oppressive patriarchal societies they are set in. Furthermore, these reproduce aspects such as the sacrifices women must make to provide for their families, the entrapment that domesticity represents, and the horrifying implications the male presence has for women in these societies. Furthermore, it may be concluded that the author offers a critique on the social order in American and Mexican society alike by transforming these experiences into terrifying otherworldly encounters.

In conclusion, CDA is a useful tool when paired with exegesis in order to analyze literary texts and elucidate situations of power and oppression. In this instance, it may be said that Amparo Dávila uses horror elements, techniques, and themes to portray the gender roles and oppression that women must face in Mexican society. Furthermore, these roles and oppressive societal orders are furthered by the patriarchal and sexist nature of Mexican culture. The approach the author gives to these issues may be a feminist critique of the inner workings of what it means to be a woman in Mexico and the intrinsic horror found in this state of being.

⁶ Original in Spanish.

Acknowledgements

I extend my thanks to Dr. Alejandra Nuñez Asomoza for her support.

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

The author declares no competing interests.

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