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Meredith Modelski

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The Damages of Excess Mining

Meredith Modelski

The setting of Silvia Moreno-Garcia's horror novel *Mexican Gothic* provides a strikingly accurate example of humans' contribution to climate change. Readers can identify that the main setting of High Place seemingly drained all the life from the town that sits below it. The walls of the mansion move with life spawned from the properties of its native fungus and its structure breathes with past lives of the exclusive Doyle family and the ongoing pain of the town's history. The power of the Doyle's and their home would be nonexistent without the great effort put into the harming of their surrounding environment and its inhabitants. The once-lively mining town of El Triunfo is transformed into a terribly dreary sight from the misuse of the Doyle's power over the area's abundant resources. Eventually, the family is destroyed as the negative effects of their actions catch up to them. Unfortunately, we are just like the Doyle's; we have inflicted damage upon ourselves and our world today by taking advantage of the earth's resources through excess mining.

Mining once supported the boom of a growing economy even as it began to show signs of a dying environment. The mining of various minerals such as coal, iron, silver, gold, and other materials became extremely popular in the 19th and 20th centuries in areas across the globe and most specifically in the Western United States. The 1848 California gold rush also jump started the influx of these mining towns. The promises of employment and wealth fueled miners to continue the race to find their own "bonanza" --a popular mining term for exceptionally large mineral deposits that produce great riches (Merriam-Webster). With these bonanzas came prosperous mining towns just as the one that gave the Doyle's their well-known name in the story of *Mexican Gothic*. The town of El Triunfo thrived off its plentiful silver and its miners' hard work. According to an article titled "The Mining Boom," "when the bonanza was at its zenith, the town prospered." These mining camps hosted thousands of workers for a few months at a time until they eventually became "exhausted or proved fruitless," and the people of the mining town would leave "behind nothing but a ghost town" (U.S. History). In *Mexican Gothic*, readers observe a slightly different

reason for the town's abandonment, discovering that El Triunfo's miners fell ill to the effects of the abundant fungus seeping out of High Place. Nonetheless, mining remained extremely popular elsewhere and its negative effects were continually ignored.

Today, it is reported that mining is responsible for 4-7 percent of our world's greenhouse- gas emissions (Delevingne). Even when mining first became popular, already large machines were needed to extract great amounts of material, quickly leading to the beginnings of increased environmental failure due to human manipulation. According to an Environmental Evidence research journal article, some effects of mining include "deforestation, erosion, contamination and alteration of soil profiles, contamination of local streams and wetlands, and an increase in noise level, dust and emissions" (Haddaway). Each of these examples connects to the statistics that prove the growing issue of climate change. While it can be argued that mining is an essential part of our economy as it is now used for more than just an individual's wealth, alterations must be made to attend to our fragile environment.

In *Mexican Gothic*, the spirit of Ruth, a former resident of High Place who attempted to destroy the mining exploits of the Doyle's, repeatedly orders the main character of Noemi to "open her eyes." This action often saves Noemi from the horrors of High Place as it helps her snap out of the gloom, a place of traumatic memories, and back into reality. If we too can "open our eyes," we can make the active decision to put the needs of our dying earth in front of the shallower wants of society. We can recognize that mining creates a shell out of our land and at the same time, leads people to become shells of themselves with minds clouded by unrealistic fantasies of endless riches and early retirement. People who are typically considered "higher up"—often literally as well as socially and monetarily—become these exact sorts of shells. This idea can again be connected to *Mexican Gothic* in the sense that the Doyle family has great wealth and power and live on higher grounds than the rest of the town, yet they are often described as hardly being present within actual society.

Like the symbol of the ouroboros in *Mexican Gothic* represents the infinite power of the Doyle family, the issue of overmining has created a dangerous cycle that humans have become trapped in. We act as the head of the snake constantly chasing after its tail that is endless money and power. Just as the Doyle family has

a life centered around this symbol, it does not take much thinking to discover that we are no better than these antagonists of *Mexican Gothic*. The undivided attention that we as a collective group give to the possibility of wealth has distracted us from taking care of our planet's needs first. When the Doyle's failed to recognize that the fungus that grew within High Place was not only weakening outsiders but also likely damaging the strength of the house's structure, the family faced great consequences. If we fail to create adjustments to mining laws, we will fail to provide for our planet's needs, and watch our home crumble like the Doyle's. A great example of irony can be identified in the final battle that Noemi fights before escaping High Place at the end of *Mexican Gothic*. The mushrooms at High Place were essentially the building block of the Doyle's power and goal of immortality. In the end, Noemi sets fire to these mushrooms, and the house burns with the same things it once began with. By overlooking the signs of our endangered environment, our society is on track to experience just the same.

Exploring some ideas that can help combat the issue of overmining will provide a proactive way to contribute to those who are already doing so. An article by author Megan R. Nichols titled "5 Ways to Make Mining More Sustainable" offers a quick read to begin this change. First, lower impact mining techniques such as in-situ leaching can "reduce surface disturbance at mining sites, lower soil erosion and move less material that would need backfilled." As noted, mining produces copious amounts of waste so beginning with lower impact techniques will be a great start for improvement. In addition, individuals have become aware that the waste that is inevitably produced by mining can be recycled in numerous ways. Another major consequence lies in the fact that the nature disturbed will simply never be the same after it is disrupted. Mining strips "the topsoil layer [that is] necessary for plant growth and [raises] soil and water acidity, making the area inhospitable to new vegetation and leaving it prone to soil erosion" (Nichols). Luckily, biosolids can be used to help fight against erosion. If soil with biosolids is taken care of, it is possible to put a halt to the lasting erosion that mining would otherwise cause. Overall, there are resources available that will help educate individuals about the actions needed to make mining more sustainable, but it is greatly important that we ensure that these changes are being made and not just spoken about.

If given more time and space to explore the topic of overmining as well as the actions we can take to help combat its effects, I would spend time recognizing the efforts and regulations that have already been put in place to address this issue. In addition, I would also offer my opinion on the pre-existing mining laws and potential ways they could be improved to better our earth. It is notable that fictional works like *Mexican Gothic* can inspire concrete, beneficial improvements to our world and it is our duty to act on this need for change.

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