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Megan Wood

University of South Florida

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A Vulnerable Heroine: How Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic* Modifies the Damsel in Distress Trope

Megan Wood

University of South Florida

Abstract

Author Silvia Moreno-Garcia is known to fully research and utilize tropes or aspects of varying genres. This allows her to creatively explore ways to change certain elements without straying from the genre, and instead offer up new considerations. Her novel, *Mexican Gothic*, follows this pattern, where she utilizes the Damsel in Distress (or DD as I refer to it), a character trope commonly found in gothic literature as a type of narrative device. *Mexican Gothic's* main character, Noemi Taboada, is a prime candidate to constitute a DD; however, many of her actions contradict this trope and push back against the elements that define it. Rather than perceive vulnerability as a weakness, Moreno-Garcia modifies this idea to establish a new view on the stereotypes associated with the DD and traits commonly associated with femininity. My paper looks deeper at the classifications of a DD and the technical elements of the story, along with the purpose of Moreno-Garcia's modification. Moreno-Garcia is an author who understands the genre in which she works, creating a sure use of modification when it comes to this trope and its various elements. With this purposefulness established, the legitimacy of this claim can be argued, creating a new twist in a genre cemented with pre-existing traditions.

Keywords: damsel in distress, gothic literature, heroine, Mexican gothic, Silvia Moreno-Garcia, vulnerable, women in fiction

On the reverse side of the Femme Fatale, crime fiction and other similarly umbrellaed genres may possess the Damsel in Distress (DD). This classic character trope typically refers to a submissive woman, with good standing in the world, who gets caught in some form of distress, usually not through any fault of her own, and is then rescued by a man motivated by love, lust, or familiar relations. The DD is a particularly popular plot device found in Gothic literature, for example Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*; however, Silvia Moreno-Garcia purposefully reframes this trope in her novel *Mexican Gothic*. While Moreno-Garcia works to establish a strong correlation with Noemí Taboada and traditional distressed damsels of the Gothic genre, such as through her possession of many common DD traits, Noemí's actions and stubborn nature never allow her to fully embody this role; instead, these characteristics are used to send a different message: vulnerability is not a weakness, nor does it discredit one's own strengths.

Moreno-Garcia wrote *Mexican Gothic* with purposeful plans of adjusting the Gothic genre, particularly its use of the DD and its relationship to her main character Noemí. When writing this novel, Moreno-Garcia took inspiration from many forms of the Gothic, both the romantic and horrific sides, such as *Jane Eyre*, *Jekyll and Hyde*, "The Yellow Wallpaper," and traditional writers such as Poe and Lovecraft (Quintana). This assortment from which she gathered her various tropes and plot elements cemented Moreno-Garcia's firm understanding, allowing her to purposefully modify these components while staying in the Gothic genre. Moreno-Garcia considers the Gothic "a malleable category," "a space where things can change," and she feels "things need to evolve and change." She states, "I use a lot of tropes and I was very self-conscious about all the tropes that I used"; thus, as a writer, Moreno-Garcia took note of the key elements of the Gothic, including the setting and formulaic plot devices, but also character types such as the "wealthy Byronic male hero" and, of course, the Damsel in Distress (Quintana). With Moreno-Garcia being particularly self-aware of the genre in which she is working, it makes evident the purposefulness in adjusting these character types and the new message she is trying to illustrate to her audience.

The purposefulness of these modifications is made more apparent through Moreno-Garcia's implementation of many key DD features, along with a heavy correlation between other DDs. Noemí is a prime character to play the DD; she is a beautiful, young woman from a rich family, who is well-educated and cultured. Moreover, Moreno-Garcia's continuous allusions to classic fairytales like "Snow White" and "Sleeping Beauty," beautiful, submissive princesses put into distress and rescued by princes, implement a correlation between DDs and Noemí. *Mexican Gothic* mentions fairytales over 25 times throughout the novel, however, it never plays a role in the development of the plot or characters. Instead, it is used to create connections, such as when Noemí compares the staff at High Place with the invisible servants in *Beauty and the Beast* (Moreno-Garcia 59) and her cousin to Sleeping Beauty (Moreno-Garcia 194). These connections indirectly create a similar connection between Noemí and these fairytale princesses and their DD status. However, moments of Noemí's inability to properly remember these fairytales, despite thinking of them quite often, symbolize a connection between her representation of a DD and her divergence from the trope (Moreno-Garcia 297). These allusions, along with the background Noemí has, help depict Noemí as a DD for the purpose of reframing its prevalent stereotypes.

Additionally, one of the most prominent features of a DD is that she is distressed, and Noemí is no exception; however, this due distress is still setting up to subvert stereotypes as they do not create a weakness in her. DDs as a character type, though not the only victims, are often victimized much more than other characters (Juarez-Paz et al.) and Noemí reflects this. On numerous occasions, Noemí finds herself trapped, undermined, or overpowered by the Doyle family. The family physically overwhelms her: “they shoved her down, Virgil’s fingers digging into her flesh. . . [she] tried to get up, to scuttle away, but Virgil’s hand was a band of iron around her neck” (Moreno-Garcia 204). Along with this physical overpowering, Noemí finds herself physically and mentally trapped. Francis explains to her, “they were afraid you were going to leave. They couldn’t let you do that. Now you won’t be able to go anywhere” (Moreno-Garcia 213). Noemí even finds herself at the whims of the house itself, as Howard explains: “The house shows you. The house loves you” referring to the frequent “dreams” she experiences (Moreno-Garcia 219). She is not even in control of her own feelings and emotions at High Place, discovering “I’m not entirely *me* when Virgil is around . . . You said the house can induce you to do certain things . . .” (Moreno-Garcia 240-241). Nothing that happens to her – the house’s favor and the family’s ensnarement— are her fault. Noemí is taken advantage of and none of her own actions lead to her distress; she is not even responsible for visiting the Doyle’s in the first place: her father is. This combination of overpowering physical and emotional situations helps to further establish Noemí as a DD.

Moreno-Garcia continues to present Noemí as a DD, putting her in a position of vulnerability, however, she does not utilize every feature of the trope in a traditional sense. One of the key features of the DD trope is that an interested man must come rescue her. Noemí does have a man, Francis, who has a romantic interest in her and does help her. However, Francis does very little in terms of “rescuing” Noemí; rather, the help he provides is more along the lines of giving her the means and the tools to help herself. He tries to prevent her from being poisoned and from starving. Francis tells Noemí, “The food you’ve had, the tea, they’ve been laced with something, yes. But the egg is fine” and “when she was done, he pointed at the toast, nodding, but shook his head at the jam” (Moreno-Garcia 228-229). He helps her obtain the tincture (Moreno-Garcia 230), provides her with his straight razor as a weapon (Moreno-Garcia 241) and creates an unfinished escape kit (Moreno-Garcia 277). This aids her escape by giving her courage and allowing her to help herself, but it is not a direct rescue. Moreno-Garcia illustrates Noemí receiving help, similar to how a DD is rescued, but the major difference is that receiving help from Francis does not make Noemí *helpless*, better defined as holding a “belief that there is nothing that anyone can do to improve their situation . . . that control over the situation or its outcomes is impossible” (2724). Her vulnerability makes it difficult to complete things on her own, without the help, knowledge, and general companionship that Francis offers her, but she is not entirely reliant upon him for rescue, nor does she give into feelings of despair and wait to be rescued; in fact, it is quite the opposite.

Noemí pushes back against the trope entirely in two main ways: first is her strong-willed nature. Though a traditional DD is meek and submissive, Noemí is very confident and stubborn. These are inherent traits as they are seen very early in the novel (“She could never picture herself failing” [Moreno-Garcia 14]) as well as very late in it (“You don’t scare me. . . I’ll kill you when I wake up. Give me a chance, I’ll kill you,” she swore [Moreno-Garcia 219]). Noemí

possesses a spirit that insists on fighting back, even when she is severely outmatched. In a scene where Noemí is forced to kiss Howard, the text states: “‘Kneel down,’ Virgil ordered her. ‘No,’ Noemí said,” and though she is still forced to (as is typical of a DD), her explicit stubbornness speaks for itself (Moreno-Garcia 204). A traditional DD may submit, but Noemí defiantly stands up for herself in whatever ways she can, and this character shift was very purposeful. Moreno-Garcia states that she “wanted to show something different that allowed me to do things with the plot that I wouldn’t have been able to do otherwise” and to do this she puts Noemí in a place of privilege, which highlights her DD class status, but also makes her the “social equal” of the Doyles, someone who “would kind of stare at them and be a little bit shocked. Someone who would think that [The Doyles] are not superior to anyone. In fact, she would think, ‘You live in a dirty old house, what the hell is wrong with you?’” A girl of less privilege and more submissiveness could “never have had Noemí’s attitude and done some of the things that Noemí did” (Quintana). This change works in favor of both making her appear like a DD (giving her a high status) and making her unlike one (providing her with a means of fighting back). Though Noemí is vulnerable and weakened by the family, she does not allow these things to become a weakness. She cannot be described as helpless as she never succumbs to a belief that she cannot help herself, rather staying firm in her defiance and stubbornness, and it is these traits which in the end allow her to pull through as the heroine.

The second differentiation is the fact that in every state of helplessness and vulnerability, Noemí never loses the ability to help herself; she *becomes* the rescuer in a complete reverse of the DD trope and a reiteration that being put in a state of weakness does not make her weak. Rather than Francis coming in to save the day, Noemí is the one to raise the gun and shoot Howard (Moreno-Garcia 274). Rather than killing the mushrooms by coincidence, Noemí is the one to start a fire; the text explains how she “tossed the lamp against the corpse’s face...creating a halo of fire, and then tongues of fire began to spread quickly,” and then it is Noemí and Catalina who fight off and kill Virgil (Moreno-Garcia 290-291). Noemí is even the one to save a weakened Francis who declares, “‘I can’t leave.’ ‘Yes, you can,’ Noemí said . . . They each took one of Francis’s arms and placed it over their shoulders, half lifting, half dragging him toward the metal gate” (Moreno-Garcia 2291). She never submits and she never gives up. She defeats the villain and stops the reign of terror. Rather than be saved, Noemí saves the man who should be *her* rescuer in any traditional DD story. When correlations in the novel create comparisons between Noemí and other distressed damsels, such as Sleeping Beauty, a very clear DD who is rescued by the prince, one of the easiest differences to spot is Noemí’s active behavior compared to Sleeping Beauty’s “highly passive behavior. . . waiting to be saved” (Mirchandani 66). This distinction is so explicit that Moreno-Garcia’s modification jumps off the page and further establishes her reframed narrative. This reversal is a defiance of the trope, and while Moreno-Garcia portrays Noemí as a classic DD in many ways, like making her vulnerable and nearly reliant upon the help of others, having her come back to be the true heroine completely modifies the trope and illustrates how vulnerability is not a weakness.

Even though Noemí possesses many of the DD traits and is made vulnerable, Silvia Moreno-Garcia breaks the Damsel in Distress trope in her novel *Mexican Gothic* by allowing Noemí to prevail and become the true heroine. Despite explicit comparisons between fairytale DDs and Noemí, which create a correlation with the trope when connected to the key features

she shares, Noemí Taboada's stubborn and confident nature prevents her from fully succumbing to the distresses she faces, and she strives to save herself no matter what her circumstances are. She even rescues her romantic lead, the typical would-be savior in a traditional DD tale. This demonstration of weak made strong gives an entirely new message about the DD: receiving help and being vulnerable does not discredit your strengths or make you weak. Moreno-Garcia's reframing helps to modify the negative stereotypes that can often accompany this trope and allow modern readers to better examine and reconsider the ways DDs are and can be used within and outside of the Gothic genre.

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