

# The monsters in my life: an analysis of violence in *Pelea de Gallos* by María Fernanda Ampuero

Los monstruos en mi vida: análisis de la violencia en *Pelea de Gallos* de María Fernanda Ampuero

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this essay is to analyze the mechanisms of counterpower in *Pelea de Gallos* (2018) by María Fernanda Ampuero, through the lens of monstrosity, in order to reveal how female characters who have been subjected to physical and symbolic violence challenge, resist, and subvert the patriarchal paradigm. This study draws on the theoretical contributions of Canguilhem (1966), Gutiérrez Mouat (2004), Cohen (1996), Giorgi (2009), and Koricancic (2011), among others, regarding the evolution and conceptualization of the monstrous, and how this category becomes a device of defense against the abuse experienced by the protagonists during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The work of Foucault (1976) is also central, particularly his reflections on power and counterpower relations, and on biopower, especially in relation to the control of bodies.

**Keywords:** women's literature; the monstrous; violence; gothic literature; analysis.

## RESUMEN

El objetivo de este ensayo fue analizar los mecanismos de contrapoder en la obra *Pelea de Gallos* (2018), de María Fernanda Ampuero, a partir de la categoría de lo monstruoso, para evidenciar de qué manera los personajes femeninos que han sido violentados física y simbólicamente tensan, resisten y subvierten el paradigma patriarcal. Por esta razón, nuestro estudio se sustenta sobre los aportes de Canguilhem (1966), Gutiérrez Mouat (2004), Cohen (1996), Giorgi (2009) y Koricancic (2011), entre otros, en torno a la evolución y concepción de lo monstruoso, y cómo esta categoría se transforma en un dispositivo de defensa frente al maltrato sufrido por los protagonistas de los relatos durante su niñez, juventud y adultez. Del mismo modo, son importantes los aportes de Foucault (1976), sobre todo en lo referente a las relaciones de poder y contrapoder, y sus reflexiones en torno al biopoder, específicamente en lo que se refiere al control de los cuerpos.

**Palabras clave:** literatura escrita por mujeres; lo monstruoso; violencia; literatura gótica; análisis

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## INTRODUCCION

The monster has been a recurring theme throughout the history of literature. The representation of monstrous beings dates back to classical Greco-Roman mythology, through anthropomorphic creatures endowed with fantastic powers, which form the foundation of Western literature. Among this variety of characters, we highlight Medusa, described by poets such as Ovid (2005), who in his *Metamorphoses* tells of a “beautiful maiden,” a priestess in the temple of Athena, who was raped by Poseidon. This act enraged the goddess, who transformed the young woman’s beautiful hair into a head of snakes, condemning her to turn to stone anyone who looked into her eyes. This allusion is important because it enables the construction of a feminine imaginary around this mythological being, and highlights the power of language to denounce physical, psychological, and symbolic violence.

In Latin America, the presence of the monster stands out since the encounter between cultures during colonization, when the “other” was narrated based on preconceived ideas that the colonizers had about the world, and when Amazons or the giants of Patagonia were described from a gaze that was estranged in the face of the unknown. But how is the monster and monstrosity conceived today? Canguilhem, in his work *The Normal and the Pathological* (1966), states that these terms have been employed throughout history—not only in literature—in a biased way. Along the same lines, Gutiérrez Mouat (2004) argues that the problem with the rhetoric of monstrosity lies in a kind of hyperinflation or overuse of the term, which has ultimately devalued it through constant use in myth, animal becoming, sexuality, and so on. For this reason, Cohen (1996) proposes re-signifying the term “monster” to eliminate its pejorative burden—associated with ugliness and the sinister—and adapt it to new perspectives of cultural and social analysis.

In this regard, Canguilhem (1966) affirms that the monster is “a morphological flaw in our eyes” (p. 201), which allows for two interpretations: on one hand, the use of “flaw” is recognized as pejorative and synonymous with error; on the other hand, it shifts the responsibility to us, the observers, who perceive “the other” as monstrous—bodies that reveal non-conventional aspects (biomedically speaking), challenging the sociocultural horizon of imposed expectations. In other

words, the monstrous is that which transgresses the model imposed by the dominant power.

Foucault (1976) moves away from the bodily factor and addresses the social element to rethink the monster and the monstrous. He emphasizes that the significance of a subject lies in the place they occupy within the discursive structures of society. Based on this premise, we understand why the label of monster is placed on object beings, whose place in society is either hidden or erased by the dominant social order. Monstrous situations call into question the precariousness of the binary division between public and private, putting it in tension and revealing the consequences of blurring these boundaries. According to Foucault, we become subjects through our subordination to the social norms of the time. Conversely, the subjectivation of the monstrous character depends on the discursive formations that construct the preconceived concept of “monster.”

In this light, modernity sees the rise of a more efficient form of power. The old perception that power merely involved letting die or making live is surpassed, as biopower (Foucault, 1976) becomes the most effective means of controlling living bodies—making them more docile, efficient, and healthy.

Giorgi (2009) goes further by explaining that the figure of the monster acts as an instrument for expressing the limits of social and cultural imaginaries, including anxieties, rejections, and fascinations. Thus, for Cohen (as cited in Giorgi, 2009), the monster’s body is “pure culture,” as its components “traverse cultural fictions and social imagination” (p. 323). Therefore, monsters are presented through the collective imaginary in the Latin American context, formed by unmentionable and unnamed beings who make up a marginal *lumpen*<sup>1</sup>.

According to Flores (as cited in Giorgi, 2009), literary monsters “drag the reader into their writing and its normative constructs of reality,” provoking the pleasure of transgressing boundaries—even if this pleasure is an “uncomfortable one” (p. 327). In this sense, “against the mechanisms of control and domination imposed by the authoritarian State, literature and the word conspire, through devices of resistance (...), to find happiness” (Villavicencio, 2017, pp. 88–89).

Although the monster has always been placed on the threshold—at the boundary that permits its

<sup>1</sup> The *lumpen*, as explained by Giorgi (2009), refers to the community of those without a community, made up of socially marginalized individuals who exist in a state of exclusion or criminality, on the fringes of conventional social and economic structures.

foreignness—giving it a voice brings it closer to the reader, humanizing it and softening its “otherness” (Rodríguez Campo, 2022). However, allowing the monster to tell its side of the story does not imply normalizing it. Monstrosity, through its grotesque and non-decorative nature, becomes part of an uncomfortable image that challenges preconceived ideas.

Koricancic (2011) argues that the contemporary conception of the monster is determined by its different and repressed appearance in response to the heterogeneity imposed by the dominant culture. That is, bodies that raise questions about their shapes and functions, causing uncertainty in the observer—most often associated with femininity. Indeed, according to this author, it was Aristotle who described woman as a “deformed man” (p. 10), introducing a (re)construction of meanings around the body governed by the patriarchal paradigm.

As previously discussed, the figure of the monster is not fixed or stable and depends on how it is constructed in different narratives. In other words, “it is not that a character emanates or gives rise to monstrosity, but rather that the text itself makes it visible in some way” (Koricancic, 2011, p. 18). Thus, the narrative environment constructs the monstrous effect through its actors. For instance, narrators like Amparo Dávila portray characters trapped in madness, violence, and solitude—living seemingly normal lives until an unexpected situation plunges them into despair and chaos. This unexpected element often takes on terrifying dimensions (Martínez, 2008, p. 2).

In Ecuadorian literature, we find cultivators of the monstrous such as Natalia García Freire, Mónica Ojeda, and María Fernanda Ampuero. Regarding the latter, Bukhalovskaya and Bolognesi (2021), Ferreyra Carreres (2020), Gaeta (2022), Galindo Núñez (2019), and Llarena (2020) agree that her work belongs to the contemporary female Gothic literary imaginary, populated by abject, subaltern, and hybrid characters who denounce, resist, and expose the forms of violence experienced by women in patriarchal-dominated spaces. In particular, in *Pelea de Gallos* (2018), it is essential to analyze the mechanisms the narrator uses to demystify the conventional figure of the monster and transform it into a counterpower device—to subvert and make visible those who have been physically and symbolically violated during childhood, youth, and adulthood.

Indeed, the stories portray predominantly female experiences marked by abuse, mistreatment, and sexism, challenging social conventions and exposing

injustices hidden in the shadows. As Bukhalovskaya and Bolognesi (2021) state, “if man symbolizes the normative, the perfect, and the human, woman is identified as ‘the other’ who lacks masculinity” (p. 91). That is, Ampuero seeks to give visibility to the voice of the oppressed woman: immigrant, homosexual, poor, ugly, insane, and Third-World. The narrator aims to give a voice to marginalized victims, revealing the deep emotional and physical wounds they have endured throughout different stages of life—wounds they must learn to endure, even at the cost of perpetual stigmatization. The characters in these stories demonstrate bravery in seeking their identity despite the hostility of their environment, transforming their traumas and wounds into defense mechanisms. For this reason, the author-narrator seeks not only to voice complaints, but also to “make visible, alongside violence, the capacity for resistance and the different strategies for women’s empowerment” (Iglesias Aparicio, 2021, p. 101).

Despite the narrative diversity of the individual stories, the tales in *Pelea de Gallos* (2018) share thematic similarities. The monstrosity of violence is a common thread throughout, manifesting in various forms: sexual abuse, physical mistreatment, psychological oppression, among others. Ampuero does not shy away from exploring the darkest corners of human experience and confronting the reader with disturbing, raw scenarios and actions. All stories are based on the hypothesis that the origin of the world’s monstrosity lies in the family unit. According to Galindo Núñez (2021), “all families here are rotten, undergoing a degrading process that will lead them to disappearance or rejection” (p. 336). Furthermore, the environment in which these families develop will influence the course of monstrosity to a greater or lesser extent. Whether the stories are set within the intimacy of a dysfunctional household, in the exposed streets of marginalized neighborhoods, or oppressive urban settings, all the spaces described in the book reflect the violence people face in their daily lives—in other words, “a distorted mirror that reflects how cruelty has become normalized as a way of relating within families, social groups, and communities” (Serrato, 2023, p. 38).

## DEVELOPMENT

### The monsters in childhood

In *Pelea de Gallos* (2018), the figure of the monster manifests itself in multiple forms during childhood. As previously mentioned, during this stage the main characters become either protagonists or witnesses of abuse, violence, and oppression. To explain this more clearly, we have identified four categories in

which monstrosity is expressed during this early phase of life: the loss of innocence, the metamorphosis of woman into monster, the desacralization of the family institution, and rejection of religion.

In the stories, the protagonists undergo a sudden loss of innocence; in other words, they are forced to abandon their innocence toward the world around them through unexpected situations they must face with precarious and improvised defense mechanisms. For example, in *Subasta*, the girl mimics the traits of a fighting rooster in the face of threats from her father's friends. In *Monstruos*, the girls, fans of late 20th-century horror films, believe the worst monsters are not those on the big screen, but those who live with them. Thus, the nanny Narcisa asserts that "we should fear the living more than the dead" (p. 20), as she is a victim of rape by her employer, the girls' father.

Accordingly, the childhood home becomes an illusion of a perfect world. This is evidenced in the stories *Ali*, *Persianas*, *Griselda*, and *Crías*, where characters are tormented by the ordinary: emotional disorders caused by violence and neglect, leading to apathy: "Honestly, I couldn't care less about it (the birthday cake) anymore" (p. 30). Violence in the childhood home becomes embodied and turns into a disease. In *Crías*, for example, the protagonist's fascination with pain provokes a need to replicate violence, even if only by reproducing social and cultural patterns: "hurting one [of the twins] so the other would feel it" (p. 43). Later, the protagonist confesses: "I no longer found it amusing that if I hit one, the other would feel pain, but I kept doing it" (p. 48), revealing the presence of a violent monster who not only has normalized the suffering of others but also finds pleasure in it.

Secondly, we encounter the process of metamorphosis of girls or women into monsters. The transition begins with awareness of the condition of womanhood to which they have been subjected since birth. For example, in *Subasta*, "the term the father uses to address his daughter, 'little woman,' becomes a kind of insult, synonymous with 'weak,' which provokes rejection" (Bukhalovskaya & Bolognesi, 2021, p. 95). This reveals the stigma surrounding the role of women. In *Subasta*, the father is portrayed as a grotesque and evil being who prefers popularity among his friends over defending his daughter, who is targeted by drunk men. In response to the impossibility of escape, the girl readapts social norms to her advantage, defending herself against the harassers: "that phrase she used to hate as a child has now become her mantra to resist" (Bukhalovskaya & Bolognesi, p. 95). According

to Serrato (2023), women who adopt social roles or aesthetic forms different from those imposed by society become a threat that society seeks to suppress—or in this case, simply ignore.

This transition into monsterhood is defined by the blurred line between the animal and the human, resulting in a process of animalization. For instance, Ferreyra Carreres (2020) identifies a symbolic correspondence between the bodies of roosters and women, arguing that both are used for entertainment and easily discarded after use—whether for pleasure or spectacle. Another example of animalization occurs in *Monstruos*, where the protagonist is called a "bull." Rather than highlighting traits like "tall," "strong," or "broad," the term is dehumanizing and used to emphasize that her body makes her less of a person—less of a woman. Nevertheless, being called a bull gradually convinces her that this is the role she must play, using it as a tool to confront figures of authority—parents or nuns—whom she no longer fears and even challenges to protect her weaker sister, nicknamed "little worm." Animality, understood by Aguilar as "the eruption of the animal within the human" (as cited in Giorgi, 2009), leads to the suspension of juridical and political consideration of the subject, who is then treated as a non-human hybrid object.

Continuing with this process of dehumanization, we interpret that emotional and sentimental components are crucial for measuring a person's "humanity"; denying them is part of the process of animalization. This is the case of Alicita, daughter of Ali, who—facing her mother's post-traumatic disorder—develops the emotional numbness of gradually growing indifferent to her mother's absence, "each day with a drier heart" (p. 90), and attempts to forcibly pass this indifference on to her brother, encouraging him to "stop crying over silly things [and] grow up" (p. 86), as if becoming indifferent were part of the process of growing up.

Third, the family becomes desacralized. While Galindo Núñez (2021) describes the families portrayed in *Pelea de Gallos* as "a shapeless being full of irate emotions" (p. 335), Bukhalovskaya and Bolognesi (2021) refer to them as "an absorbing, aggressive, and strange entity—the home as a space of repression and pain" (p. 88). From this convergence of opinions, we understand that in *Pelea de Gallos*, childhood is the stage during which the collapse of the great institution of the family occurs. This decline begins the moment children become part of the chain of violence that originates within the home. It begins with an abusive father—himself previously abused—continues with

a submissive, abusive, absent, or indifferent mother, followed by abusive siblings, and ends with the youngest child, who in turn will seek to harm those around them, as seen in the environment of the protagonist in *Crías*.

Finally, rejection of religion from childhood is also a theme addressed in *Pelea de Gallos*. In fact, Iglesias Aparicio (2021) positions the family as one of the most sacred spaces in society, and at the same time one of the most corrupted by violence and inequality—closely tied to religion. In these spaces, the narrator questions the influence and power of religion in the protagonists' lives, detailing how faith can become a tool of control and manipulation of the masses. In *Monstruos*, the story explores indoctrination. On one side, Mercedes, who exhibits clear signs of obedience, submission, and religious devotion, is praised by the nuns who run her school and is recommended for a religious vocation. On the other, the protagonist Narcisa, who constantly challenges and subverts the dominant religious power, is harshly reprimanded for her continued disobedience and repeated questioning of a diminished church. Simultaneously, Mercedes displays an unconscious rejection and fear of religious figures, as shown in her dreams where "the nuns, possessed by the devil, dancing naked, touching themselves down there, appearing in the mirror" (p. 21) haunt her nightmares. Likewise, in the story *Cristo*, the nine-year-old protagonist already senses that the ritual of visiting the *Cristo del Consuelo* (Christ of Consolation) and paying for dismembered doll parts in hopes of a miracle for her little brother will not bring any real change. She realizes that the "holy water (...) couldn't possibly be miraculous. With that filth in my mouth, I felt like screaming at everyone that they were wrong, that the only miracle here was that woman (...) receiving coins for selling little body parts" (p. 62). In these passages, religion is presented as an oppressive system that perpetuates violence and reinforces the subordination of women.

### The monsters in adolescence

In *Pelea de Gallos*, adolescence and early adulthood are portrayed as tumultuous and challenging stages, marked by experiences that define the transition to maturity. We have identified five key dimensions of monstrosity that appear in youth: interest in sexuality, initiation into femininity, subjugation to the patriarchal system and male will, the awakening of consciousness, and finally, the rupture of the relationship with religious institutions. In each of these, narratives intertwine to reveal how the protagonists and other marginal beings in the stories are labeled as monsters for not conforming to society's dominant ideology.

First, the sexual experiences of the characters at this stage must be divided into two types: consensual and non-consensual. This distinction is necessary because some characters engage in sexual interaction by their own will, while others are forced into encounters with strangers. On one hand, consensual erotic experiences evoke a sense of self-discovery, where the character identifies practices and relationships with which they feel most comfortable—even if these are labeled as forbidden, sinful, or morally unacceptable. This aligns with the profile of the monstrous, as carnal desires in these stories exist in secrecy. On the other hand, when interactions are not consensual, the objectified protagonists are reduced to sexual objects, exposed to the lascivious gaze of a system that forces them to conform to standards of beauty and behavior for the satisfaction of others.

In *Nam*, for instance, the protagonist is drawn to her best friend, her desire "bursting like millions of fireworks in [her] brain" (p. 31), until she kisses her "with a love so intense [she] thought it would kill [her]" (p. 35). Later, in a more erotic and physical act, the friend's brother joins them, culminating in an incestuous encounter. Similarly, in *Persianas*, the young protagonists vow to marry all three of them together and become better parents than their own.

The sexual awakening during this phase is riddled with acts of self-discovery, satisfaction, and pleasure. In *Crías*, sexual arousal is disturbingly associated with animalistic cannibalism: "learning that the hamster kept giving birth and eating its babies excited [her]" (p. 47)—an experience far removed from conventional desires and cynically condemned by the Church.

In *Luto*, María is caught by her brother while "touching herself between her legs and moaning" (p. 75), prompting him to call her a "whore, ally of the devil," because, for him, "that's what being a whore was: enjoying pleasure" (p. 75). Consequently, María is condemned to repeated sexual violence by all kinds of men, including her own brother.

A similar situation arises in *Subasta*, where the woman-body-sex is auctioned off to the highest bidder: "the fat man touches her. I know because he says *look at those tits, so nice, so perky, those little nipples* and he drools—and you don't say those things without touching, and anyway, what's stopping him, who?" (p. 16). In this way, the girl is dehumanized, her body commodified, described in "a language without place, as her body is a foreign or disruptive one, in relation to the grammars of thought and social life" (Giorgi, 2009,

p. 324). The use of vulgar language creates a polyphony of fear in the reader. Language transgresses reality and builds an atmosphere that intensifies the grotesque.

Likewise, for the protagonist of *Nam*, menstruation becomes the greatest tragedy of her life. The arrival of “her period” (p. 37), with all the symptoms that accompany it, acts as a trigger for her to perceive herself as a monster—incapable of loving and being loved—because the image of a person covered in bodily fluids is, to her, inherently unattractive and therefore unworthy of affection. This fear is rooted in the social taboo that surrounds menstruation, regarded as an impure, shameful, and monstrous event. In this story, the protagonist would rather lie than admit the real reason she urgently needed to use the bathroom.

A third interpretive thread is the awakening of consciousness, in which the protagonists come to a painful and revealing realization: the true monsters are found within the home—or are part of it—embodied by family members, friends, or neighbors. The author portrays the fragile and threadbare protection afforded to women in spaces where the protagonists remain in a constant state of alert and mistrust. Such is the case of Felipe in the story *Persianas*, where the traditionally assigned role of men as protectors is deconstructed. With his newly awakened awareness and sorrow laid bare, our protagonist agrees to engage in a sexual encounter with his mother. Felipe knows it is wrong—he knows that his mother is seeking refuge in the warmth of the only man she has left—but he surrenders to the bitterness of abandonment.

This example makes evident the mother’s physical and sexual domination. Yet even more striking is the awareness that family conflict is the norm, not the exception. In every household, across all social strata and conditions, acts of violence take place in the name of “love.” These behaviors, however, are normalized within the privacy of the home, where no one is watching. This means that while we may know that violence and oppression occur behind every closed door, those very same acts—socially accepted in private—are publicly condemned beyond the bounds of familial intimacy.

A fourth thematic thread emerges from the protagonists’ subjugation to patriarchal will, as they internalize and obey the paradigms of an oppressive reality. The narratives expose a system in which young women are pressured to meet male expectations, renouncing their own autonomy and personal aspirations. Throughout this process, they are subjected

to physical, emotional, and sexual violence, as well as the imposition of roles and stereotypes—locked in a constant struggle to preserve their integrity within a hostile environment governed by male dominance. One of the stories that best illustrates this theme is *Crías*, in which the protagonist need only “say yes to men,” especially in the sexual realm, even if it means becoming “a cheap glass slammed against the walls of different houses” (p. 49).

In *Luto*, the protagonists are subjected to the will of their older brother, who, despite expressing his own sexual desires freely, finds it abhorrent that his sisters should have any. On one hand, he forces Marta to adopt a submissive and compliant attitude toward him, denying her the ability to protect her sister in exchange for sparing her the same fate. María, on the other hand, is fully subjected to his will. The youngest of the siblings is taken—naked—to an animal stable, where the men are given free rein to violate her in every possible way: beating, burning, cutting, stomping, biting, and doing anything their basest instincts dictate, with no one there to stop them— “so she would see what people are capable of when nothing holds them back” (p. 73).

Biopower, as studied by Foucault (1976), is understood here as the exercise of control over the private life of the body. In this sense, the older brother—whom we interpret as a figure of Lazarus—embodies the power that, in the name of religion, not only decides between life and death for the accused, but also disposes of her body as if it were manipulable merchandise. María undergoes what Foucault called “torture”: the physical (and later spiritual) torment that pushes the body to the threshold of tolerable pain, serving as a warning to others about what might happen if they commit similar transgressions. Nonetheless, the punishment inflicted on María is rooted in false religious morality, as evidenced by the fact that her brother abuses her while believing no one is watching. Punishing her for something he himself does entirely invalidates any supposed moral justification.

It is therefore unsurprising that Marta’s most radical act of subversion was letting her brother die when he fell ill. She devoted herself to the task of appearing to care for him while secretly trying to inflict greater suffering than the illness already caused. In doing so, she finally subverts his power. After the man’s death, “for the first time in her life, Marta sat at the head of the table” (p. 71), a symbol of power now rightfully hers. Her god would no longer be the one her brother believed in, the one in whose name he inflicted so much pain on María. Her god was now her sister, a woman capable

of enduring the worst of humanity and still surviving. Traumatized by the abuse they suffered, the women make the definitive decision “that they didn’t need a man, least of all that man” (p. 74) to live—and live well.

### Monsters in adulthood

The transition from youth to adulthood is depicted as a stage marked by cruelty and suffering. For the purposes of this analysis, we identify four monstrous manifestations during this phase of life: the man—whether as husband, boyfriend, brother, or father—who exercises the hierarchical power granted by the patriarchal society; the being in crisis, whether existential, familial, identity-based, or related to belonging; the “other,” a marginal subject who disrupts the system and threatens the social order; and finally, the figure of religious appearance.

To begin with, recognizing monsters in adulthood requires understanding the subjugation of the protagonists by a dominant male figure who holds ultimate authority in their immediate environment. In *Crías*, we find two mothers who have submitted to the will of their husbands. The protagonist’s mother, visibly terrified of her husband, constantly seeks to please him and keep him satisfied. Despite remaining in the marriage until his death, there is no indication that their relationship ever evolved into something healthier or more loving. Meanwhile, the mother of the twins is so invisible that the narrator describes her as “a stain walking in a dress” (p. 47), completely overshadowed by the father’s authoritarian and violent presence. Though she also succumbed to his will and dedicated her life to her role as a housewife, the father still abandoned his family. This illustrates that submission to a man is not about mutual respect or familial harmony—it is a means of survival. And for many characters, survival means enduring sexual violence at the hands of fathers or partners.

A second theme is that of the being in crisis, where protagonists perceive themselves as monsters or are able to recognize monstrousness in others that remains invisible to the broader society. For instance, Ali succumbs to a devastating depression, neglecting her roles as mother, wife, employer, and person. The trauma she experiences deteriorates her mental and physical health, leading to the disintegration of her family and the loss of any hope for recovery. After signs of self-harm—such as slashing her face—Ali ultimately takes her life in a shopping mall. While the public sees her as a deranged and disfigured monster, the protagonist identifies *men*, especially her father, as the true abuser and violator.

In *Crías*, we also find the crisis of the migrant, which portrays the tragedy of returning to a country once left behind. The protagonist believes that “to return [...] is impossible” (p. 41), and thus a crisis of identity unfolds. Someone who began a new life abroad may feel a lingering connection to those left behind, but upon returning, realizes that life has moved on—and that they no longer belong. Less explicitly, the story also touches on the figure of the one who stays behind, “*the forgotten of familial exiles*” (p. 42), represented by the childhood neighbor she once loved. In this narrative, the monster is the marginal being who belongs nowhere and is thus viewed as strange, intrusive, and undesirable.

A third approach to the monsters of adulthood connects with the concept of cultural hegemony. One’s position in the social hierarchy determines the extent of power one wields. Classism, therefore, becomes a key factor that exposes the hidden monstrousness within us. In *Coro*, characters believe that physical appearance is a direct reflection of social status, using it as the primary metric to judge and assign value to others—perpetuating inequality, prejudice, and discrimination. These aesthetic parameters go beyond clothing, makeup, or material wealth. They are the *physical complement* to the hegemonic corporality required to be seen as equal. In this story, Verónica—darker-skinned and less extravagant—is accepted into a group of friends only to serve as the object of their ridicule. In a euphoric state, the women drop their inhibitions, and after humiliating her with cruel “jokes” about her origins, speech, and appearance, they drown her. Once the adrenaline subsides, they walk away without guilt or remorse. To society’s privileged sectors, the *marginal other* may well be utterly disposable.

In the short story *Ali*, there is also a contrast between the realities of domestic workers and their employers. The former must give up their own lives to raise the children of their mistresses, who, in turn, are forbidden from gaining weight or losing their youth and desirability. This narrative highlights the tendency in contemporary literature to desacralize the archetypical role of immaculate motherhood. Domestic workers take on the role of protector in the children’s imagination, filling the void left by the indifferent, absent mother. This means that, in most cases, it is the maids who raise and educate the children, forging affective bonds that surpass the barriers imposed by social class. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that these children grow up and internalize a more biased worldview, influenced by their social circles and prejudices, because they are destined to become “ladies and gentlemen of society



who know not to greet the help with hugs or kisses" (p. 86), thereby perpetuating a cycle of rejection.

A fourth monstrous manifestation is the rejection of false religious promises. In the same story, *Ali*, domestic workers pray to "Baby Jesus" to receive divine favors. These women believe that "God listens more to the poor because he loves the poor more (...). Being poor had to be good for something" (p. 93). Here, religion is portrayed as a mechanism of control, which the story seeks to destabilize through persistent irony.

### Monsters in old age

In *Pelea de Gallos*, old age is the least explored stage of life. Nonetheless, three key moments are identified: the invisibility of the elderly in society, the association of the body with sexuality, and indifference toward older adults.

It is important to recall that old age tends to be marked by solitude and neglect. These characters are pushed to the margins of society, their significance diminished by family, friends, or acquaintances. They are viewed as useless, forgotten, and stripped of identity and dignity. The lack of attention and care plunges them into profound despair and helplessness. The narrative voice explores how society tends to discard and devalue those bodies it no longer considers subjects, condemning them to the solitary fate of old age.

Such is the case of Felipe's grandmother in *Persianas*. The elderly woman has become part of the house's furniture. We learn that after suffering a stroke, she lost her ability to speak and is unable to voice opinions or comments about what happens in the household. Even the potential to communicate through writing is taken from her by her daughter, who prefers to silence her rather than allow her to interfere again in the family's affairs.

Secondly, the physical appearance of the body is addressed. The unnamed protagonist of *Cloro* "looks at herself in the mirror for a second and then covers her face with her hand. (...) She remembers her skin was once the color of mother-of-pearl, a face carved from pure alabaster, and now it's pink carrot-colored cardboard" (p. 107). She laments the sorrow and solitude her appearance has condemned her to. She asks her reflection: "Is she still a woman?" (p. 108). Though no longer attractive to men, she still yearns for physical contact and carnal pleasure. She sees herself as a desiring monster, but undesired—a worn-out body in a desperate attempt to feel human warmth.

The third and final approach to old age in the collection is the indifference shown by these characters toward the world around them. They experience a gradual detachment from reality, becoming estranged from what surrounds them. This could be interpreted as a symptom of inevitable senility, preventing them from fully comprehending their environment and deepening their emotional isolation. Apathy and disinterest become a defense mechanism in the face of societal abandonment.

### CONCLUSIONS

*Pelea de Gallos* belongs to what is known as the "new Latin American short story" (Gaeta, 2022), not only for its direct and unflinching style—more and more prevalent in contemporary narrative—but also for its themes. The new millennium brings a drive to narrate and denounce issues such as gender-based violence, LGBTQ+ exclusion, migration, and the scandals surrounding the Church, among other urgent matters. These new realities are teeming with monsters—marginal beings that defy aesthetic, moral, sexual, corporal, and mental conventions, as well as the unspoken agreements that uphold subjugation.

As Foucault (1976) argues, wherever there is a relationship of domination or submission, there exists the possibility of subversion, to a greater or lesser extent. Thus, against the powers imposed by the Church, the State, society, or the family, we find marginal figures who challenge these relationships by creating counter-power mechanisms—such as those embodied in the Gothic.

Initially, the text addresses the presence of the monster in childhood, showing how it manifests in the loss of innocence, the transformation of girls into monstrous figures, and their dehumanization—alongside the desacralization of the family, especially the parental figure, and religious rejection. The author exposes the harsh reality faced by young girls in a violent world, aiming to raise awareness about the need to protect the most innocent and vulnerable to break cycles of abuse and oppression.

In contrast, adolescence is presented as a time of confrontation, pain, and awakening. During this stage, characters face grim realities while navigating the complexities of adult life. The Church is depicted as a dominant institution whose influence still persists in the social imaginary of Latin American culture. Through her stories, Fernanda Ampuero challenges established



social norms, exposing the injustices and inherent oppressions of a violent patriarchal system.

Adulthood becomes a space where monsters from childhood and adolescence re-emerge, resurfacing past traumas and horrors that haunt individuals in their instability. As a result, this life stage is steeped in cruelty, destruction, and oppression—often at the hands of those closest to home. The stories dive deep into the intimate secrets of family life, with recurring figures such as the husband, who exerts control over his wife in various ways. However, these women break the circle of subjugation by questioning the social structures of power that attempt to control populations.

Finally, old age is portrayed as a time of bodily deterioration and transformation, distancing the individual from accepted standards of beauty. As a result, society expresses disdain toward the aging body, reducing the elderly to spatial ornaments devoid of desire, obligations, opinions, and rights. This perception plunges them into a state of invisibility and silence.

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