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Amparo Dávila's "El huésped" and Domestic Violence

"El huésped" is a riveting short story set in a married couple's house in rural Mexico, to where the husband unexpectedly brings "a guest" to stay for an indeterminate amount of time. The story holds the reader's attention immediately, because the description of the unnamed visitor appears to resemble more an animal, such as a huge puma or jaguar, than a human being. On a realistic level of interpretation, it is a horror story bordering on the surreal, since one can hardly believe that a husband would actually leave such a vicious animal in the house with his wife, children, the maid, and the latter's child. But much of the literary caliber of the story lies in the fact that it is indeed believable and appealing as realistic fiction. Within the realism of "El huésped," what stretches the limits of our willful suspension of reality is the question that the story conveys on a metaphorical level: what or who is this violent guest, uninvited by the wife, who is emotionally and physically abusing the women and children of the house? What is this creature to symbolize? On this level of interpretation that we perceive "El huésped" rises above its initial appeal as a fictional tale of terror and reaches the status of a realistic social commentary on domestic abuse. It thus becomes a narrative of "dos historias en una sola" ("Amparo Dávila" 1). Closely examined, the literal information on the guest's arrival, its behavior, and the fear it instills in the women can be seen as symbolically symptomatic of an abusive spouse: in this case, specifically, the husband.

Amparo Dávila receives merited acclaim for her literary output. Aurora Ocampo characterizes her short stories as some of "las mejores colecciones de nuestros días" (177). Ana María Morales ranks her among "algunos de los más importantes autores mexicanos del siglo pasado" (67). Seymour Menton states, noting her due recognition for the fantastic elements in her narratives, which her realistic stories stand out also (368). Richard Reeve, referring to her literary production up to the late 1970s, describes Dávila "as one of the two or three most important women writers in Mexico today" (160). Most of the analyses of her stories to date focus on her blending of fantasy and realism, and entering "into the realm of the psychological short story," which we see in "El huésped" (Reeve 161). The themes of entrapment and escape, isolation, immobility, and madness, have been identified as hallmark characteristics of her writing by Erica Frouman-Smith (in "Descent," "Patriarchy," and "Patterns").

The narrative of terror commences with the introduction of the mysterious guest. Our analysis of "El huésped" first begins with the literal description of the animal in question, in order to determine its role on the primary level of the plot. Once its distinctiveness is fully established, we can position the beast as the "emblem" or signifier and interpret its behavior symbolically as the subliminal signified.¹ Identification of the "guest" is complicated by the narrator's use of words that can be interpreted as descriptions of human behavior as well as animal characteristics, reflecting the polyvalence of meaning this antagonist will be shown to embody. Furthermore, more than a few readers insist that, from the beginning, originally and always, the beast described is really a human being. So it behooves us to first turn to a fundamental explication of the text and surmise what we can generally associate with the given, textual information provided by the physical description and behavior of "el huésped."

Our first clue for identifying this unwanted guest is the reaction of the wife when her husband first brings it home. The horrific atmosphere of the narrative is established immediately when the wife says, "No pude reprimir un grito de horror" (50).² She is paralyzed by fear. The husband tries to assure her (and, thus, the reader) that the guest is harmless: "es un ser inofensivo" (53), but the physical reaction of the wife rings truer, textually, than the husband's remarks. The reader immediately begins to empathize and identify with the wife as a victim of imposed male power and perceive the "ser inofensivo" as almost otherworldly, and certainly unsuitable to bring home for a stay. At this early point in the story, lines are drawn. We realize that what is inconsequential to the husband is completely unexpected and little short of unbelievable for the wife. Their perspectives on reality -the nature of the "guest"-are completely opposite. Besides siding with the wife at this point in the narration, the reader will almost unavoidably be prejudiced against the words and actions of the husband in the passages that follow, due to this synecdoche from the opening scene.

After her initial horror, the wife describes the guest as, "lúgubre, siniestro. Con grandes ojos amarillentos, casi redondos y sin parpadeo" (50), heightening the suspense of the narrative. As mentioned, the author is careful to craft all descriptions so that they could conceivably apply to a human as well as a beast. The reader's task falls on deciding which characteristics are more likely to be descriptions of a large cat or dog and less logically those of a human being. After noting the sheer physical fright of the wife upon seeing the guest, our attention is captured with the

¹ I employ "emblem" here as M.H. Abrams defines it in his description of symbols and metaphors (184-85).

² The quotes are from the Fondo de Cultura Popular edition (Mexico), but the story is perhaps more accessible to most readers of this journal via *Breves cuentos hispanos* (Prentice-Hall 2000), 47-57.

reference to yellowish eyes. This is not a normal description of human orbs. Either the narration is touching on a gothic description of the semi-dead, or the reference is to luminescent feline eyes.³ Dávila's prose, later in her career, shows this tendency toward a mixture of realism and *lo real maravilloso*, but thus far in our story, we have no noticeable signal that we have entered the realm of the imaginary. This beast really has yellowish eyes, so the chances are slim it is human.

When we examine the living conditions and habits of the guest, we build a stronger case for the antagonist as a bestial creature. The narrative reveals how it is given a large room in which to stay, "pero húmeda y oscura" (50). It sleeps until dark, and the protagonist-wife never witnesses when it retires to sleep: "Dormía hasta el oscurecer y nunca supe a qué hora se acostaba" (50). It is usually at this point in the text that the proponents of the 'huge canine' interpretation recognize an inconsistency. Dogs are generally not known to be nocturnal creatures, although some are, such as the Great Pyrenees dogs and Dingos. Furthermore, we recall the archetype of dogs and wolves (from which all canines have descended) howling at the moon and the intertext of the night terrors of the hound of Baskerville is also imbedded here. But cats, biologically and in the tropes of literature, are more nocturnal. Although this distinction is not an exclusive rule of behavior of these two types of animals, it is an understood pattern, and interpretation must commence with commonly accepted signifiers. There is no indication that the author is not using traditional symbols and emblems in this text. What is distinct is that she has placed the behavior (the terror provoked), the emblem (the cat), and its implication (the impending violence) in a domestic setting. That is, while it is relatively unproblematic to accept that the oblique descriptions refer to a large cat, the innovation of the story lies in the suggestion that the cat is a nightmarish, unwanted house guest.

This guest invades the feminine spheres traditionally assigned by patriarchal custom: the kitchen and the bedroom. A curious characteristic of the guest is that, at night, it begins to position itself in the room outside the bedroom of the wife and directly in line with the door to the room. Logically terrified, the wife almost never leaves her room. On some earlier attempts, she found that the beast would silently follow her to the kitchen and watch from a corner of the room: "Algunas veces, pensando que aún dormía, yo iba hacia la cocina por la merienda de los niños, de pronto lo descubría en algún oscuro rincón del corredor, bajo las enredaderas" (51). This is not normal human behavior; it resembles a big cat pointedly observing and stalking its prey. Such actions cannot easily be rationalized as human. To attempt to do so, one could only interpret them as highly unusual, socially

³ Referencing Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Frouman-Smith remarks on the "female Gothic" characteristics in Dávila's stories ("Patterns 50-51).

unacceptable, and clearly intimidating. In other words, the actions of the guest become too obvious if it is human. But if seen as the actions of a wildcat, then the behavior is more logical, thus also sustaining the horror of the wife as reasonable.

An additional clue to the identity of the beast further heightens the gradually exposition of terror: it eats only meat: "Toda su alimentación se reducía a carne, no probaba nada más" (52). Here, given the confluence of feline characteristics revealed to this point, we have to rule out totally the possibility of the antagonist being human. "The guest" is described as dark, with yellowish eyes, nocturnal, a stalker/hunter, and a carnivore. To seal the conclusion, the text presents a passage where the animal enters the room of the wife while she sleeps. Upon awakening to the site of the animal sitting beside her bed and staring at her, in an act of desperation and fear, she hurls a gasoline lamp at it, which breaks and sets the floor ablaze. We are reminded that all animals, except for the most domesticated, are afraid of fire, and we note that the cat suddenly jumps up and bolts from the flames in the room: "El se libró de golpe y salió de la pieza" (52).

The classic turning point in the narrative comes when the beast actually attacks. Guadalupe, the maid, while gone to the store, leaves her infant son sleeping in another room. Since the scene describes is set during the day, there is no sense of danger. The cat's threatening actions have always taken place at night, until now. But, while the wife is busy combing the hair of her children, she hears a blood-curdling sound emanating from the child's crib.

Estaba peinando a mis niños cuando oí el llanto del pequeño mezclado con extraños gritos. Cuando llegué al cuarto lo encontré golpeando cruelmente al niño. Aún no sabría explicar cómo le quité al pequeño y cómo me lancé contra él con una tranca que encontré a la mano, y lo atacé con toda la furia contenida por tanto tiempo. (53)

It is in the text's use of the word *golpeando* to describe the big cat's behavior that some readers still see human action. But the author dares not state "pawing" or "scratching;" intentionally preferring non-specificity. For the reader to clarify the true nature of this hitting, we observe that the child is left "lleno de golpes y de arañños que sangraban" (53). One great difference between cats and dogs is that a dog's nails or claws are fixed. Under normal circumstances, they would not extend beyond the paw to scratch. You feel only the blow of the calluses of the paw when a dog "hits." A cat, having retractable claws, can extend them for defense or for attack. The cat can draw blood with its claws extended, which is what "the guest" does to Guadalupe's baby. The attack on the child is the breaking point for the wife and her maid. I quote Erica Frouman-Smith: "His cruel attack on the maid's innocent, sleeping baby is the pivotal step that both underscores

the scope of his brutal nature and forces the women to respond" (52). They make the courageous decision to board up the animal's room, once it has retired, thereby starving it to death. The suspense of the narrative increases even more as they do so and only decreases gradually as no sound emerges from the guest room in the days that follow.

Once the fundamental action of the plot is revealed and the story understood on the most basic level, we turn our attention to the equally intriguing level of symbolism and allegory. To analyze well the emblems of signification, we need review the husband's role in this tale of terror. After the cat attacks the maid's infant son, the wife conveys to the husband what the animal has done. In the clearest and most plaintive manner possible, she expresses that the beast is a threat to their children and begs her spouse to take it away. His reaction is telling: "Cada día estás más histérica. Es realmente doloroso y deprimente contemplarte así... te he explicado mil veces que es un ser inofensivo" (53). Nothing reveals and condemns the husband more than using the sexist and chauvinistic word "hysterical." The term itself is a fiction. It is a sign without a signified, a symbol without an emblem. There is no such disease or condition as hysteria; it is only a convenient fabrication by the medical doctors of the late nineteenth century.⁴ The husband's use of this stereotypically sexist remark is a strong indication as to the true nature and origin of the guest. Frouman-Smith states that the guest is the husband's alter ego ("Patterns" 52). This statement is true, but its implications need to be plumbed. If we are going to argue that the beastly guest is metaphorically the husband in a different guise, it behooves us to examine the husband more by isolating the passages that define him. Identifying his behavior is as important as the determination we have made about the nature of the guest.

The primary point of significance regarding the guest and the events that unfold is the fact that the husband himself brought the guest home without the wife's prior knowledge or consent: "Nunca me olvidaré el día en que vino a vivir con nosotros. Mi marido lo trajo al regreso de un viaje" (50). It is an imposition on the wife, a partisan act of power by the dominant male. The narration continues to describe the couple's relationship, revealing that, after three years of marriage, the wife "no era feliz" (50). We now know, intuitively, that the husband has caused and structured this unhappiness, and the text bears out our suspicion. It is to this domestic atmosphere of unhappiness and discomfort that the husband brings his guest. After listening to his wife's plaintive request that he not leave the guest in the house, the husband gives no credence to her worries and, from his position of patriarch who knows best in all matters domestic, chides her

⁴ For more on the myth of hysteria, see Martha Noel Evans, *Fits and Starts: A Genealogy of Hysteria in Modern France*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991.

like a child: “Es completamente inofensivo”—dijo mi marido mirándome con marcada indiferencia. Te acostumbrarás a su compañía y, si no lo consigues...” (50). Not only is the heavy-handed husband indifferent to his wife’s pleas, he makes it a point to leave a threat hanging. The silence that follows “si no lo consigues...” is tremendously intimidating, for the implication is clear: if she does not learn to live with the guest, the husband is ready and capable of expelling her from the house instead of the guest. Evidently, in the biased eyes of the husband, the problem is his wife, a typical conclusion of abusers. If she continues to be a problem, she can be removed. Underscoring the unidirectional nature of this conversation, we realize there is no dialog; rather two distinct, polar positions without any expression of understanding or compromise. The only choice is what the husband espouses, so typical in patriarchal societies that bestow the right to decide and govern to the male. Reflecting the impossibility of communicating her concerns and fears to the person who should be most sympathetic, the wife confides to the reader: “No hubo manera de convencerlo de que se lo llevara. Se quedó en nuestra casa” (50). Compounding this narrative of terror, the text makes it clear that the big cat instills mortal fear in everyone in the house. Everyone except the husband. Quite revelatory of his attitude—which can be seen to be purely sadistic—is the fact that he enjoys the discomfort of the others: “Sólo mi marido gozaba teniéndolo allí” (50). The fact that the husband is aware of the fears and worries of everyone in the household and can still enjoy the presence of the beast that causes this trepidation reveals his pathology. A person who delights in the misery and fears of his family meets the primary definition of a sadist: someone who receives pleasure from inflicting pain on others.

On the question of delights and pain, the husband has been encountering his own particular pleasures outside of the home, while inflicting pain on those at home. He makes frequent trips and often works late—very late. The connection between his lengthy and frequent absences from the home and the action of bringing the monster to his house can be seen in the explanation of Sergio Navarrete Pellicer:

Los hombres que trabajan lejos de sus hogares por largos períodos de tiempo, desconfían y sospechan de sus mujeres y las amenazan y maltratan ante la sola idea de que llegara a ocurrir tipo de relación extra-marital (no necesariamente sexual) durante su ausencia. (73)

Ironically, but not unexpectedly, it is the husband who is unfaithful, as we see in the wife’s aside that he is “being entertained” elsewhere: “Y llegaba bien tarde. Que tenía mucho trabajo dijo una vez. Pienso que otras cosas también lo entretenían” (52). This is an important implication, one consistent with the behavior of the abusive male. Disrespect and abuse of the spouse often begin because of a love affair. Uzma Mazhar indicates that

one of the signs of domestic violence, categorized under "Abusing Trust," is "being unfaithful" (1). What the male cannot obtain at home in the conjugal bed and subsequently finds in another woman is a primary source of resentment and hatred of the wife who will not or cannot give him what he expects as integral to matrimony. The discontent of the husband, besides taking the route to an extra-marital affair, is commonly manifested in blaming the wife. Traditionally, this act of assigning culpability comes hand-in-glove with acts of resentment and revenge directed toward the wife, in the form of psychological and physical abuse. This abuse is meted out by the husband in "El huésped" and symbolized in the diabolical creature he has brought into the home to restrain and punish the wife. As already established, the vicious guest is the "*the husband's alter ego*" (Frouman-Smith, "Patterns" 52; emphasis added). Following a pattern detected in Dávila's stories, "El huésped resulta ser un desdoblamiento animalizado del esposo ausente" ("Amparo Dávila" 4), and the animal carries out, by physical and psychological means, the husband's retaliation for his discomfort in their marriage and home.

The next bit of damning information about the husband comes after the episode of throwing the lamp at the cat in the wife's bedroom. Attempting to communicate the gravity of the situation to her husband, the wife-narrator reports: "Mi marido no tenía tiempo para escucharme ni le importaba lo que sucediera en la casa. Sólo hablábamos lo más dispensable. Entre nosotros, desde hacía tiempo el afecto y las palabras se habían agotado" (52). Apparently, the husband's lack of concern is so extreme he does not even care if the house catches fire, which is what almost happens. This action of "not taking [the wife's] concerns seriously" (Mazhar 2), is another indication of an abusive spouse. How can a husband sit in his house and not be worried if it burns to the ground? He can only do so if he has somewhere else to live—some place that holds more of his interest than the house of his wife and children. Only then can we understand why "ni le importaba lo que sucediera en la casa." As referenced above, that other place would be where he finds "otras cosas que lo entretenían" (52), outside of his house and his marriage.

Finally, as regards the comportment of the husband, we must remind ourselves of his words to his wife, after the attack on Guadalupe's son: "Cada día estás más histérica," and recall the lies about how, with each day that passes, it hurts and depresses him more to see his wife in such a state: "Es realmente doloroso y deprimente contemplarte así" (53). With such rhetoric shown to be false, through the husband's non-speech, indifference, and inaction throughout text, we can correctly extrapolate that the story presents in microcosm the whole of their married experience. Questions regarding where and why it went awry, and who initiated the emotional separation that led to the abyss of non-communication, are moot at this point in the narrative. What is most crucial to the plot, theme, and moral of

the story is how the wife will react to the domestic violence of her husband, which is allegorized in the figure of the sinister, threatening beast.

The text at this juncture presents actions and words that clearly symbolize a situation of women in an environment of violence. Those familiar with the behavior and psychology of the abused spouse will recognize the pattern in the wife's comments and thoughts at this point. After the horror of the cat's attack, and subsequent to her fainting and regaining consciousness, the wife experiences the fear of all women living in such threatening environments: the possibility they might be left alone in their hell: "Temí que Guadalupe se fuera y me dejara sola" (53). It has been shown to be historically certain that the abused spouse is almost always too paralyzed to act on her own. Only solidarity with another person (or agency) has been shown to provide hope for confronting and resolving the situation. Alone, the abused person virtually never takes the crucial first step of standing up for herself and of literally or figuratively saying, "*Basta.*"

Contemporary studies on the patterns of domestic violence confirm how the actions, threats, and words of "El huésped" are unmistakable signs of an abusive partner. In her telling, concise article on the subject of spousal abuse, Mazhar states: "Domestic violence has different forms, but its goal is always the same: control through fear." It is my suggestion that such is precisely the role of the uninvited guest: to instill fear as a vicarious extension of the abusing husband. Per force, then, we have a story of male abuse of the spouse as allegorized through the actions of the big cat. Mazhar has composed an extensive list identifying behaviors typically manifested by batterers and abusive people, one that bears striking similarity to the actions described or known to have happened in the story. From her "Signs of Physical Abuse," I have chosen the descriptions most relevant to the action in our story:

Physical Abuse: Hitting, slapping, kicking, pushing...

Verbal abuse. Constant criticism, making humiliating remarks, not responding to what you are saying.

Disrespect: Not listening or responding, telling you what to think and how to feel.

Minimizing, Denying, and Blaming: Making light of your behavior and not taking your concerns seriously. Saying the abuse didn't happen.

Isolation: preventing or making it hard for you to see friends and relatives, controlling where you go.

Harassment: Following you, or stalking you, refusing to leave when asked.

Abusing Trust: Lying, breaking promises, being unfaithful, not sharing domestic responsibilities.

Threats and Intimidation: Threatening to harm you, your children, keeping weapons and threatening to use them.

Emotional Withholding or Neglect: Not expressing feelings, not taking your concerns seriously. (1-2)

Upon quick review, it is transparent how all of these characteristics are seen in the male and bestial behavior in "El huésped." The husband/guest slaps and hits the child, humiliates his wife by ignoring her feelings, disrespects her in his denial that the cat is dangerous, blatantly refuses to take her concerns seriously, isolates her in their house so distant from civilization, stalks her when she gets up at night, abuses her trust by his extramarital entertainment, implicitly threatens her children by attacking Guadalupe's child first, and refusing to express his feelings while he simultaneously disparages and ridicules hers. These observations by professionals establish undeniable parallels between the action in "El huésped" and domestic violence. The only thought we need keep in mind as we compare this list to the story is that there are two figures demonstrating the behavior on the list: the husband and the beast. It is pointless and even incorrect to separate their actions, for they are one. The man, on a literal level, is abusing his wife; and the beast is abusing her on a psychological level. Both combine to reveal to the reader the intimate horrors of a violent home that are too often ignored.

Faced with this domestic horror, the wife does what many abused women cannot do: fight back. Even the narrator herself confesses that if she did not have Guadalupe, she might not have found the courage to response: "Temí que Guadalupe se fuera y me dejara sola" (53). Additionally, in a passage that is chillingly contemporary, the wife states:

Pensé entonces en huir de aquella casa, de mi marido, de él...
pero no tenía dinero y los medios de comunicación eran difíciles.
Sin amigos ni parientes a quienes recurrir, me sentía tan sola
como un huérfano. (53)

Those versed in the pathology of abuse recognize that these sentiments wife are the identical concerns of women today in the 21st century.⁵ Although there are now shelters and refuges, programs to educate, and law-enforcement officers with heightened consciousness, the fact remains that women stay in abusive situations because they imagine that they need money to get out of the house, and they do not know who to contact for help nor where to go—just as the narrator describes herself. As in other

⁵ In fairness, credit must be given here to an invaluable resource, close at hand, for this topic. My wife, Linda Pennington, has spent substantial time as a therapist for the abused. What I have learned has come vicariously through her sobering experiences as a professional. My "seeing" the signs of the abused in this text is thus an example of using one's "own intertextual reservoir, which consists of all the reader's experiences and knowledge, both literary and otherwise, that s/he can use to gain interpretive access to the work at hand" (Martin 71). I am thankful that Linda shared her "experiences and knowledge."

stories by Amparo Dávila, the setting here is distant and isolated: “Vivíamos en un pueblo pequeño, incomunicado y distante de la ciudad. Un pueblo casi muerto y a punto de desaparecer” (50). Therefore, in the case at hand, the wife cannot flee to another house or refuge. Describing in professional and contemporary terms the environment and mindsets that brought the wife to such a closed situation, Pamela Chamberlain remarks:

The domestic domain has historically been considered private, with an assumption that open, public spaces were the main cause for concern when protecting women from violent predators. As a result of the accepted criteria and thus the concomitant negation of domestic violence, the level of violence in the home has been for generations underestimated. Also, the fear of retribution, should a woman, in desperation, consider reporting her cohabiting attacker, dissuades many women from lodging a complaint, thus encouraging, and at times perpetuating the myth that domestic violence is on the ebb. It becomes clearer why women, ensconced in the construct of the respectable ‘set-up’ of ‘domestic harmony’; enveloped within the emotional, financial and legal confines of a ‘marriage’ situation, did not easily report violations towards themselves, when the public indifference left them in an even more dangerous, vulnerable and volatile situation than if they kept silent and suffered, until either an irritated neighbor selfishly reported a disturbance, or death prevailed. (2-3)

Understanding, now, why the wife cannot leave, and also realizing that her death might “prevail,” we concede that her only recourse is to fight back, which she does successfully—but only with the support of another. It is a repeated and tragic mistake of the abused to believe they can overcome the situation individually. Rarely can it be done. The immediate advice given by professionals is unequivocal: get out of the house and seek assistance. In our text, help is fortunately in the house in the person of the stalwart and physically strong maid, Guadalupe. Working together through their fear of the outrageous animal and the sadistic husband--who will return home any day--they manage to starve and suffocate the cat to death. We cannot resist the interpretation that, by locking him away, they have deprived him of subjects to abuse, and, being deprived of his prey, he consequently has no justification to exist.

What happens after the beast’s death is the most important silence of the story. We have only one clue. At the climactic point of suspense in the narrative, the wife tells her present story as a past nightmare: “Vuelvo a sentirme enferma cuando recuerdo...” (53). We can deduce two positive messages from this introspection. First, the pain and sickness are remnants of the past—“un recuerdo.” Second, the wife is someplace that does not now

make her sick. At a very minimum, we can speculate that she is away from the bully, the husband/beast, who made her life so miserable and her body and soul so infirm. Wherever that place is, it symbolizes a triumphal escape. It signifies freedom through violence after all entreaties to rationality and kindness fail.

As mentioned, the wife's liberty is only achieved with the support of her maid. Before concluding our study, we need turn our analysis briefly to the role and significance of Guadalupe. It is noteworthy that the maid is the only character of the plot who is given a name. Unavoidably, then, we must examine the significance of her name in the story and in the context of Mexican culture. Guadalupe, of course, resonates with allusions to the patron Saint of Mexico, *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. Eric Wolf refers to the Virgin of Guadalupe as a "master symbol" of the Mexican nation that "seems to enshrine the hopes and aspirations of the entire society" (34). At the familial level, for example, the Guadalupe symbol is associated with the desire to return to the comfort a Mexican mother provides her offspring, be they Mexicans of Indian descent or descended from Spaniards. Guadalupe welcomes and protects them all. In addition to her role as protector of her children, *la Virgen de Guadalupe* is also seen as a rebellious and hopeful symbol in the Mexican family.

The Mexican family pattern is also consistent with a symbolic identification of Virgin and mother, within a context of male and adult dominance and sexual assertion, discharged against females and children. In this context the Guadalupe symbol is charged with the energy of rebellion against the father. Her image is the embodiment of hope in a victorious outcome of the struggle of generations. (Bushnell 263)

Assigning the name Guadalupe to the maid in the story speaks to Dávila's knowledge of the power structures in Mexican families and her narratorial ability to craft a pivotal character endowed with symbolism that reinforces the central theme of male spousal abuse. The Virgin of Guadalupe is a traditional symbol of refuge and succor,⁶ but she is also, as thematized in "El huésped," a figure of rebellion against male dominance. As Wolf explains with considerable clarity, her image is connected with "successful rebellion against power figures" (36). The symbolism was born during the wars for Mexican independence (38), and we espy this same defiant Guadalupe fictionally transfigured into the pivotal role of aiding and empowering victims of violence to win their freedom in "El huésped."⁷

⁶ Women's shelters in Mexico and across the US southwest bearing the name of Guadalupe are practically innumerable.

⁷ I am indebted to a colleague, Maria F. Martinez, for indicating to me the polyvalent implications in the name Guadalupe and urging further research on the topic.

In conclusion, after reviewing the text carefully, it becomes evident why this powerful tale of the horror of domestic abuse pushed to tragic limits is so frequently studied and praised. It presents an impressive combination of the literal with the figurative, with which the author is able to address the age-old, secret perversity of violence against women and children. Recognition of the superb literary style and the provocative social content of the story impels us to return and re-examine other works by the author, just as the Mexican *Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes* urges: "Las obras completas de Amparo Dávila deben ser reeditadas." To do her writings justice, we must continue to look beyond the literary and psychological analyses to see her texts as cultural studies of their time with universal implications for ours.⁸ "El huésped" rips the veil away from the disgusting and cowardly practice of batterers in such a way that it condemns not only the culture specified in the text, but all male-dominant societies, since virtually all abuse women and children. Hardly any subject could be more sobering, and being so, the stories of Amparo Dávila merit a more serious reading in order to determine what more she is saying in her literature about society. To declare that her stories "deserve to be better known" is an understatement (Reeve 161). It is to be hoped that this study may ignite a rekindling of serious interest in her literary texts and cultural contexts.

⁸ That is, we are obliged to investigate the contexts—the social realities—reflected in literary texts, as Yvette Flores-Ortiz, Carlos M. Vilas, and Michael P. Johnson and Kathleen J. Ferraro do. To paraphrase Barbara Johnson, if literature could truly solve the problem of violence against women, "we would doubtless not need so much of it" (13, quoted in Rooney 1270).

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