

The Nameless Boy: Loss of Identity in Baldomero Lillo's "Gate No. 12"

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In “Gate No. 12” (1904) by Baldomero Lillo (1867-1923), two male characters, Pablo and José, are given names, but the third young boy mentioned in the story remains nameless. Pablo, José, and the unnamed boy’s lives are dictated by the coal mining companies of Lota, Chile, where boys as young as eight are forced into inescapable employment. With a limited future already, the third boy in “Gate No. 12” suffers a further loss of individuality by lacking the distinction of a name in the text. In Chile at the turn of the 20th century, where the coal mining system had societal power at the expense of the laborers, the boy’s anonymity represents his loss of worth and demonstrates the mining institution’s control of identity and sense of autonomy.

Young boys in the mines, who were assigned the most tedious jobs, were viewed by the overseers as expendable. The foreman in Lillo’s story directs his newest employee, Pablo, to Gate Number 12, where, “he will replace José, the hauler’s son, who was run over yesterday” (Lillo 108). The overseer recognizes no difference between José and Pablo, and he expresses no remorse over José’s tragic death. Neither does he acknowledge that Pablo has a name, neglecting to address him directly in favor of simply referring to him as, “this child” or, “this boy” (107, 108). This step away from personalization marks the beginning of Pablo’s own loss of identity. Pablo’s father, an experienced miner and already depersonalized, is regarded in a comparable way, “the old miner (...) the old man (...) the father” (108, 109, 112). To the overseer, all the miners are the same. As long as there is someone to do the work, he is satisfied. The two boys, José and Pablo, are interchangeable. They are lumped together as a single identity as gateboys and neither one is otherwise singularly important.

Although Pablo and José enjoy the privilege of bearing names in “Gate No. 12,” the name of the third young male is not revealed in the story. As Pablo is led through the tunnels of the

mine to his work station for the first time, he passes by the third boy. The latter is pathetically slumped against the wall and is referred to only as, “a ten-year-old boy” or, “a small, vaguely outlined, huddled shape” (109). The nameless boy blends into the multitude of dark, soot-covered laborers. As Carmelo Virgillo suggests in “Symbolic Imagery in Baldomero Lillo’s ‘La Compuerta Número 12,’” “the miners’ physical features, grotesquely disguised by their dim surroundings, deprive them of all sense of individuality” (143). Visually, the nameless boy is indistinguishable from the others, and in this way, he is objectified and appears inhuman<sup>1</sup>.

Furthermore, the anonymous boy is caught in the generational cycle of mining. He is thrust into a routine of fourteen hour days, in which, at the mercy of the coal corporation, his ancestors lived and worked, and his sons will likely live and work as well. Pablo’s father captured this idea as he explains that, “sons succeeded fathers and in the pit the rising and descending of the human tide never ceased” (Lillo 111). As Pablo’s father indicates, there is no difference between the quality of lives of the citizens in the mining town from decade to decade. Similarly, Virgillo has argued that there is no sense of individualized identity through the ages either: “time is the only dominant factor, and it is portrayed by the narrator as a vicious circle leading nowhere but to inevitable demise” (143). There is an overcast atmosphere of helplessness among the laborers because they see no other option than to continue to mine. The unnamed boy accepts that, “the mine never freed those whom it had caught” (Lillo 111). He is hopelessly undifferentiated from the masses, both in the mines and in his lineage, devaluing his individual existence.

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed analysis of dehumanization through animalization of the miners in “Gate No. 12,” see Virgillo’s “Symbolic Imagery in Baldomero Lillo’s ‘La Compuerta Número 12.’” All miners are dehumanized in the text: “like the recalcitrant colt who trembles at the sight of the whip, these old miners felt their tired flesh quiver,” (Lillo 109). They are also grouped together as one entity, instead of as individual beings: “that human worm” (109). However, the fact that the nameless boy in particular is not identified emphasizes his inhumanity even further.

Apart from Pablo's rudimentary dehumanization by the foreman, the nameless boy foreshadows Pablo's likely future deterioration in the mine, as a weary and forlorn, lifeless body. The unnamed male is only two years older than Pablo, but already seems to be, "swallowed up by the darkness" of the mine, which serves as a hellish prison (109). In appearance alone, it is, "a crypt, draped in black and full of shadows (...) [with] the reddish glow of their lamps" (107, 110). In accordance with Richard Ball Jr.'s "The Contrast of Light and Shadow in Baldomero Lillo's Poetic Vision of Hell," the dark imagery implies that "more than descend into a mine, they actually descent into a hell on earth" (329). Additionally, the overseer personifies the devil as he sits at the entrance, "behind a writing table writing in an enormous ledger," marking so many names in daily attendance that none could be remembered (Lillo 107). Like a lost soul in the mine, the nameless boy has, "open, expressionless" eyes, "fixed stubbornly on high," and, "thirsty for light, moist with nostalgia," (109). His melancholy expression indicates that he yearns to be aboveground, but now is oppressed and buried in the earth. Virgilio observes: "[the workers] are all portrayed as living dead who move around in a dark, muted, terrestrial hell" (143). Being concealed from the sun has sucked the life out of the unnamed boy, so that as a consequence of working underground, he has lost his personality and his soul.

The key difference between Pablo and José on one hand, and the working boy on the other, is that the nameless boy's identity as a child is vanished. First, Pablo symbolizes the blissful ignorance of adolescence. Through the eyes of the foreman, Pablo has a "weak little body" which was "yanked from his childish games," previously unburdened, both psychologically and physically, by work (107). Upon realizing the gravity of his situation, Pablo reverts to a dependency on his parents. He futilely calls for his mother, but in her absence, turns

to his father for protection: “The child (...) let out penetrating shrieks of awful anguish, and they had to drag him forcibly from between his father’s legs, which he grasped with all his strength” (112). He struggles to escape and return to the safety of his naive childhood, but when no one comes to his aid, he is catapulted into a reality of enslavement. Pablo’s innocent pleas and shouts sharply contrast with the silence of the unnamed boy. Instead of begging for help like Pablo does, the nameless character does not fight for his freedom. He merely sits on the floor, “[spending] the interminable hours of his interment submerged in a sad stupor” (109). The unnamed boy’s vitality has been replaced with a hollow emptiness, and he has resigned himself to his fate. He is alone and calls out to no one; the purity and value of the nameless boy’s youth is already long forgotten. Then in comparison to Pablo’s nascent childhood, José, whom Pablo is instructed to replace, was tragically jerked to the termination of his life by a mine cart. José’s young life was prematurely snatched from him. He symbolizes freedom through death, which was his only release from the mines: “for these - the prototypes of an exploited and endangered class - the only way out is death” (Virgillo 150). This freedom is something for which the nameless boy can only long.

Pablo bears a name because he has not yet been contaminated and aged by bondage underground. For his part, José found freedom from work in eternal rest and reacquired his name with his passing. José is given acknowledgement with a name because he broke out of the mine and evaded a life of incarcerated degradation; he will forever be remembered as a child. However, the unnamed male, though still young, is no longer an innocent boy. He is owned by the coal mine corporation, and his enslavement robs him of his freedom, hope, happiness, and right to a name and a “self.” Baldomero Lillo chose to render this boy anonymous, and as an

unspecified character he embodies the misery and entrapment of a myriad of other young boys who were exploited in the coal mines of Lota.

Works Cited

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