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CARMEN LAFORET'S NADA:
FROM BILDRUNGSROMAN TO WILDER(W)OMAN

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Abstract

The prize-winning Bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel, Nada (1944) by the Spanish writer Carmen Laforet, tells the story of eighteen-year-old Andrea, who, in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, fulfills her long awaited dream of traveling to Barcelona to study at its University. But the house on Aribau Street, where her relatives live, turns out to be a microcosm of Spanish social ills. It is filled with the spiritual, moral, physical and emotional decadence typical of Spain in the post-Civil War period of the 1940's, hence the title Nada [Nothing]. Thus Andrea arrives at Aribau, having the appearance of, as her uncle Roman describes her, "a disoriented little mouse, but not so unhappy as she looks" [una ratita despistada, pero no tan infeliz como parece]. Though perhaps disoriented, Andrea is not dispossessed, for it is she, as my essay will show, who in the end, not only manages to distance herself from the already mentioned decadence, but also becomes a sort of psychological mother for those who reside at Aribau.

My objectives for this essay are to examine this aspect of Andrea's character, which coupled with the crucial moment of psychological individuation experienced in adolescence, fit nicely into a prototypical structure that has been designated the "wilderwoman." According to Jungian analyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés, "wilderwoman is the health of all women. Without her, women's psychology makes no sense. This wilderwoman is the prototypical woman . . . no matter what culture, no matter what era, no matter what politic, she does not change" (Women Who Run With the Wolves 9-10).

I began with a close reading of Nada in order to discover the salient characteristics of the structure and content of the narrative. Then, with the help of recent feminist approaches to female psychology, I explored my thesis regarding Andrea's psychological strength, discovering that this particular protagonist (from a specific culture, era, and politic) does indeed meet Pinkola Estés' description of the "wilderwoman."

The prize-winning Bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel, *Nada* (1944) by the Spanish writer Carmen Laforet, tells the story of eighteen-year-old Andrea, who, in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, fulfills her long awaited dream of traveling to Barcelona to study at its University. What she finds is "a city she has loved in [her] dreams" (Laforet 7). But the house on Aribau Street, where her relatives live, turns out to be a microcosm of Spanish social ills. It is filled with the spiritual, moral, physical and emotional decadence typical of Spain in the post-Civil War period of the 1940's, hence the title *Nada* [Nothing]. Moreover, Andrea's relatives, being of bourgeois origins, are incapable of confronting their new economic situation, negating the possibility for new avenues. Still, the "deficit" of the people on Aribau Street goes well beyond the economic sphere. This family's moral and psychological deficit is more powerful and dismal than their lack of financial resources, although, superficially, money problems often spark conflicts among the various members of the family.

Thus Andrea arrives at Aribau, having the appearance of, as her uncle Roman describes her, "a disoriented little mouse, but not so unhappy as she looks" [una ratita despistada, pero no tan infeliz como parece]. Andrea might have been disoriented but not dispossessed, for it is she, as my essay will show, who in the end, not only manages to distance herself from the already mentioned deficits, but also becomes a sort of psychological mother for those who reside at Aribau.

Nada is more than a coming-of-age novel. Like many novels written by adolescent females during the Spanish postwar period, it constitutes a lucid account of the struggles women faced as well as their aspirations for personal growth. This narrative "allows the reader an early glimpse of woman's desire . . . [a desire] to achieve some measure of creative and cultural, as well as personal and social, authority" (Ordoñez 33). Thus Andrea's profound desire to gain such "authority" together with her reaching that particular moment in adolescence which "seeks to speak the as-yet-spoken" give Andrea the necessary strength to transcend her circumstances (33). In this process she not only

manages to remain psychologically and spiritually whole, but also extends that wholeness to others.

As Bruce Lincoln points out in his *Emerging from the Chrysalis*, the initial steps in the process of maturation and individuation are recognized as crucial by non-western cultures. His study of women's initiation rituals show how such moments in a young woman's life are celebrated by these groups in an attempt to make women "more creative, more alive, more ontologically real" (Ordoñez 33). In our case, Andrea arrives in Barcelona still encased in a cocoon, but the tremendous shock caused by the circumstances at Aribau accelerates and intensifies her maturation. She rapidly sheds her chrysalis. Remarkably, Andrea's unconscious recognizes this process: "In my dream I saw myself running, stumbling, and suddenly feeling that I was shedding something like a dress or cocoon that tears and falls wrinkled at my feet" (Laforet 177). Thus Andrea emerges ready to confront an "unsuspected truth," to face—without denial—the extreme dysfunctionality of her family.

But what are the hidden primal sources that allow Andrea to move through such a remarkable journey? Jungian analyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés, who has written extensively on the intrinsically intuitive aspect of female psychology, namely the "wild woman archetype," offers an answer: "wilderwoman is the health of all women. Without her, women's psychology makes no sense." The analyst, who herself grew up in a post-war period, shares similar experiences with Andrea: "My generation grew up in a time when women were infantilized . . . [and] kept as fallow gardens . . . but thankfully there was always wild seed which arrived in the wind" (Pinkola Estés 5). This "wild seed" is not geographically nor culturally constrained but rather is universal; accordingly, "wilderwoman is the prototypical woman . . . no matter what culture, no matter what era, no matter what politic, she does not change" (9-10). *Nada's* main protagonist and narrator, Andrea, is that "wild seed" that falls at the doorstep of her relatives' house on Aribau.

Throughout the narration, Andrea demonstrates that time and again she possesses the strength of a wild woman. The use of the word "wild" should not be understood in the modern pejorative sense, but in its original sense meaning "to live a natural life, one in which the creature, has innate integrity and healthy boundaries" (Pinkola Estés 8). From the very beginning she clashes with the degrading conditions she finds at Aribau. Andrea conveys her aversion through her vivid and highly sensorial observations. She specifically says, "my own body, standing on tiptoe amidst brilliant threads of water in that filthy porcelain bathtub, trying not to touch those dirty walls," and she also expresses her desire to keep herself distant, "What a relief to be out of sight of those queer creatures" (Laforet 11).

Such a distinct sensorial ability, made evident time and again throughout the narration, is compatible with the description of the wild woman archetype. Through the senses, this archetype

"sheaths the alpha matrilineal being . . . through sights of great beauty . . . through sounds . . . through the mystique of inspiration" (Pinkola Estés 8). When Andrea is invited to Ena's house for an afternoon of music and wine, she is awed by the passionate singing of Ena's mother. She leaves the house restless, feeling bewildered and unsure as to how to satisfy the persisting desire for beauty that listening to Ena's mother has ignited:

I quickened my pace until I reached the main entrance of the cathedral (Figure 1), and as I looked up at it, I found at last the fulfillment of my wish. As I gazed at the realm of shadows cast by the pious stones, a strength prevailed over me greater than that which wine and music had given me. The cathedral, designed almost in the form of a plant, rose in austere harmony up to the clear Mediterranean sky. Peace, a majestic radiance, emanated from the magnificent architecture. Around its dark outlines loomed the glittering night slowly orbiting it in rhythm with time. For a few moments I let that profound magic permeate me. (Laforet 96-97)

Hence, the "disoriented little mouse," now liberated from her chrysalis and armed with the devices dispensed from her kinship to wilderwoman, becomes a stabilizing influence for her family members and friends, that is, "both friend and mother to all who have lost their way" (Pinkola Estés 9).

When Andrea arrives in Barcelona, she finds a family who collectively suffers from a fragmented psyche. Undoubtedly, the people at Aribau have needed a "mother," one who possesses psychological integrity and healthy boundaries. Both men and women at Aribau have failed to preserve such integrity; they have allowed the trauma of war to creep up and exacerbate weakness. Their economic statuses, appearances, gender inequalities, and even their already damaged egos, fracture their psychological wholeness. All of the above confirms Pinkola Estés' assertion that "when we lose touch with the instinctive psyche, we live in a semi-destroyed state . . . subsumed by the culture or by the intellect or the ego—one's own or those belonging to others" (Pinkola Estés 10).

Consequently, at the time of the narration, the matriarch of the family has been reduced to a mere "grayish blur of a decrepit old woman" (Laforet 9). The grandmother has all her life followed the role, imposed on her by patriarchy, of an "infantilized" grown up woman. She has bestowed privileges onto her male children and has withdrawn the same from her daughters. She has now certainly turned into the dependent child. In spite of her desperate attempts to mother Andrea, it is clear that the roles are reversed. Andrea recalls this experience: "Against my breast I felt her heart beating like that of a little kitten. 'If you wake up scared, my dear, call me,' she said with her quivering voice" (12).

The grandmother's natural successor in the matriarchal line, the eldest daughter, Angustias, is not surprisingly also a victim of the system. To this daughter's credit, she tried to rebel in her youth when she attempted to marry a man beneath her socioeconomic status, but in the end she failed to rise to the challenge. Unable to overcome certain obstacles, she has ended up defeated, frustrated, and disillusioned. Predictably enough, Angustias attempts to regain strength by adopting the role of matriarch over the family, but she fails. Consequently, she tries to impose her "matriarchy" over individuals she suspects have little power, like Andrea or the beggar down the street, both of whom she nags and preaches to, demanding they recognize her "authority." She fails at this too; Andrea soon slips away, refusing to play her game, and the beggar, who has depended on Angustias' charity, has only been putting on a front.

The other two women at Aribau are equally fragmented. Gloria, Juan's wife, is also a child in a woman's body. Completely self-involved, she has immersed herself totally in her tortuous relationship with Juan. Andrea describes Gloria as a woman who possesses a "naïve and stupid vanity." Throughout the novel she repeatedly asks Andrea the same question: "It's true that I am pretty and very young? Isn't it?" Furthermore, in the midst of her justification of Juan's explosions of anger, Gloria contradicts herself: "Juan is very, very good, kid. *Don't you see that he squawks so much and everything?* [italics mine] Well, he is extremely good" (Laforet 28). It seems as though Gloria uses adjectives like "pretty," "young," and "good" to cover up the ugliness that surrounds her. The maid Antonia impresses Andrea even less: "Everything about that woman looked horrible and wretched . . . never has any creature produced such an unpleasant impression on me" (9-10). Antonia, perhaps the extreme example of the psychological destruction noted before, has been not only the victim of postwar culture, but also a victim of her gender and her socioeconomic status, which has made her a prime target for abuse. She has become a victim of Roman's ego as well. He has taken advantage of Antonia's psychological weakness, which she expresses in her servitude and unhealthy loyalty towards him. All the women at Aribau benefit from Andrea's psychological integrity. Andrea is able to assuage the psychological fragmentation in her environment by distancing herself from it or on occasion acting in direct opposition.

Andrea's uncle, Roman, had early on perceived, not only the inner strength, but also the nurturing side of her niece's "wilderwoman." She is the "mother" he needs, one who nurtures his love for music and art: "Say, don't you want to play music today? . . . Do you also paint?" Roman answers these queries like a child bragging about his talents: "I've done a little of everything" and moved to please Andrea with one of his best violin performances. Andrea is able to perceive Roman's enormous artistic talent. She lets him know with a mixture of interest and admiration for his art: "My soul, outstretched like my own clasped hands, would receive the music as parched earth receives



Figure 1. Gaudi's Sagrada Família, Barcelona. Courtesy of the Gaudi and Barcelona Club.

rain. To me, Roman seemed to be a marvelous and unique artist. He would weave into music such pure joy that it transcended the limits of sadness" (Laforet 32). Andrea might have almost saved Roman from his horrible end, his eventual suicide, but Roman could not "transcend the limits of sadness" nor escape the psychological subjugation imposed by his ego, his intellect, and his culture.

Roman's brother Juan, possibly the most tormented soul at Aribau, also benefits from Andrea's mothering care. When Juan, in a fit of rage, goes out to look for Gloria in the red light district of Barcelona, Andrea hurries after him in order to protect him as much from himself as from the world. This is perhaps one of the most significant and moving episodes in which Andrea cares for another. It is also in this episode that the reader realizes how little material resources Andrea has: "I run in pursuit of him as though my life depended on it. . . . Distressed, I thought that if it should occur to him to take a trolley, I wouldn't have the fare to pursue him" (141). She manages to follow Juan from a distance while journeying through "dark and foul-smelling alleys" (143) until he gets into a fight with a drunkard. After the fight, Andrea helps Juan to escape from the police and cares for him: "I took a handkerchief out of his pocket so that he could wipe off

the blood that was dripping on his eye. I tied it on him, and then he leaned on my shoulder" (145). Andrea is no guardian angel sent from heaven. She is just a flesh-and-blood, underfed, eighteen-year-old girl: "I was beginning to feel as tired as I often did during those days. My knees were shaking so much that it was difficult for me to walk. My eyes were filled with tears" (145).

Andrea cares for all of her relatives at Aribau—the grandmother, Angustias, Gloria, Juan, and Roman. All receive, in one way or another and to one degree or another, her care. But Andrea extends her care beyond her family. The novel's third and last part begins with Andrea returning, disillusioned, from a party with her socialite friend and pursuer Pons. She has confronted her reality and has affirmed her desires. It is then that she finds the mother of her best friend Ena waiting for her. All of a sudden, Andrea is made the confidant of a mature woman. Ena's mother opens up completely to Andrea and shares her most intimate feelings with her. Perhaps out of desperation, perhaps because she perceives Andrea's psychological integrity, Ena's mother does confide in her and does allow Andrea to see her at her most vulnerable point: "Her lips were trembling. She realized that she was talking to me, and in trying to control herself, the color of her eyes changed. Then she would close them and let that tumultuous speech overflow like water that breaks through dikes and drags everything along" (191).

After this prelude, Ena's mother starts her detailed narration of her relationship with Andrea's uncle Roman, from first falling in love to the very sad ending of their relationship many years before. Her father tells her that Roman accepted a bribe in exchange for his disappearance from his daughter's life. Andrea is not comfortable hearing these intimate details, but she not only listens, she herself keeps an objective distance: "I was getting embarrassed listening to her. . . . Like youth itself, I was then sour and uncompromising. All the defeat and oppression of that confession repelled me. The fact that that woman would relate her misfortunes aloud almost made me feel sick" (194-195).

Thus Andrea shows with this last episode her capacity to observe and be present before "all the defeat and oppression" without being trapped by it. And still she finds a point of contact between that woman, for whom she feels nothing but aversion, and herself:

There was nothing more to say, since it was easy for me to understand that terminology of blood, pain, and creation that begins with the same physical substance when one is a woman. It was easy to comprehend it knowing that my own body was prepared—as though laden with seeds—for the task of continuing life. Although then everything in me was bitter and incomplete like hope, I understood it. (197)

Andrea understands well the language spoken by Ena's mother, and even though this provokes in Andrea a feeling of bitterness, she accepts the woman's pain as having no remedy. But Andrea also knows the language of female nature, of creativity, of inspiration and intuition provided by the wilderwoman, the part that is also a woman's "physical substance." Andrea intuitively knows that she is prepared, "laden with seeds (wild?)" for whatever may come. Did she "save" anyone at Aribau? Perhaps not. More importantly, rather than saving them, she has saved herself and her wilderwoman from the dangers of the "unsuspected truth." By doing so, she has provided through her narration a bastion of light for generations of wilderwomen to come.

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Rosario Nolasco

Faculty comments

Ms. Nolasco's mentor, Spanish professor Kay Pritchett, finds her critical essay to be insightful and accomplished. She says:

Although for several semesters I have asked students in my Monuments of Spanish Literature class to submit analytical essays, I have yet to encounter a more sophisticated interpretation or a better organized short essay than Rosario Nolasco-Bell's paper on *Nada* submitted last semester. This particular assignment is designed to encourage analysis more than research. Rather than requiring students to spend their time locating and reading criticism, I have chosen instead to have them focus upon reading and interpretation. Rosario's short paper portraying Andrea, the novel's protagonist, as *wilder woman* is striking both for its originality and insight. It moves past the surface reality of the novel and discovers a mechanism for associating this particular text—a product of post-Civil War Spain—with issues of a universal nature. In my estimation, this is a singular accomplishment, difficult even for more experienced readers.

Although, for the most part, in literature classes we tend to focus upon the smaller issues—the details of language, plot construction, and so on—the ultimate goal, the one we perhaps too often fall short of, is to read the text in some especially meaningful way, some manner that not only serves the act of reading but enriches the knowledge and understanding of the reader. Rosario's interpretation of *Nada* attains this level of discernment. She is able to perceive in Andrea the archetype of healing feminine power, the woman who in spite of personal limitations and external hardships is able to journey forth towards wholeness. I find it remarkable that Carmen Laforet, a woman of some twenty years, was able to create such a character as Andrea. I also find it laudable that one of my undergraduates has been able to perceive this significant yet heretofore unrecognized facet of Laforet's young protagonist.

May I add that Ms. Nolasco-Bell is as assiduous in her other assignments as she has been in the writing of this short essay. She shows considerable promise for becoming an accomplished critic of Spanish-language texts.

Steven Bell, the Director of the Latin American Studies Program, stresses Ms. Nolasco's contribution to the area of Spanish literary criticism. He says:

Rosario Nolasco is one of our very top graduating seniors in Spanish, and the work she has done on this project, entitled "Carmen Laforet's *Nothing*: from Bildungsroman to Wilder(w)oman," clearly indicates why. The work Rosario has produced shows a most unusual degree of scholarly maturity and critical

acumen for an undergraduate major. She clearly understands the style and conventions of professional literary criticism; and her piece would I think readily be accepted for presentation at a graduate student conference and publication in a graduate student journal. She proposes to bring a new issue and approach to the scholarship on the highly regarded work of fiction under consideration. Rosario has formulated an original and incisive, interdisciplinary problem and hypothesis involving feminist theory and its historical application, and she has cogently outlined the parameters and variables involved. She also demonstrates clearly the wherewithal to articulate coherently and forcefully the results of her analyses, which promise to make a substantial contribution to this area of Spanish literary criticism.

Historian Bryan McCann is impressed with Ms. Nolasco's understanding of the political nuances dealt with in the novel. He writes:

I want to recommend the inclusion of Rosario Nolasco's essay in the coming issue of *Inquiry*. Rosario offers a subtle critical analysis of Carmen Laforet's *Nada*, truly opening up the novel for the reader and exploring its most significant implications. Rosario has taken on a difficult subject and handled it with expertise; her work is innovative and professional, and would make an excellent contribution to the journal.

Laforet's novel, from 1944, depicts a Spain riven from within, and desperately attempting to conceal its own divisions in the wake of the Spanish Civil War. It is no accident that the novel is set in a middle-class Barcelona home—Barcelona had been by far the most radical of Spanish cities in the early days of the war, experiencing a brief but fervid period of political anarchism and sensual liberation, an ambience in which the character of the young Andrea might have felt completely at home. A split between anarchists and Marxists, followed by the bitter reaction of a conservative merchant sector and the rise of the Falangists under Franco, brought this period to a crashing end. The novel is set in the ensuing period of repression and consolidation of power, and Andrea finds herself in the claustrophobic and hypocritical environment of the bourgeois Aribau family home.

Rosario's reading of this predicament and the ensuing conflicts shows great insight, combining historical and political awareness with sensitive and close attention to the text. Rosario uses Clarissa Pinkola Estes's model of the *wilderwoman*—a kind of ur-female, both primitive and transcendent—to illuminate Andrea's character and her influence on others. Rosario's use of this model is flexible and enlightening, rather than restrictive, resulting in a fine appreciation of the political and sensual dimensions of the novel.