

The Role of Women in Carmen Laforet's Short Stories

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Although Carmen Laforet's five novels and seven novelettes better develop such themes as identity-development, autonomy, Christian values, and social repression, some of her short stories are also invaluable contributions to the consistent messages of feminism and social criticism present in much of her work. Greatly masked by Catholic themes such as charity, love and sacrifice—partially resulting from the author's own spiritual conversion in December 1951—the stories' social criticism is nevertheless not difficult to discern, though scholars have generally overlooked it.¹ Between 1944 and 1954, Laforet published a total of 14 short stories; 10 were published as collections, the remaining four—"El infierno," "Recién casados," "El alivio," and "El secreto de la gata"—were published in the periodicals *Ínsula* (1944 & 1952), *Destino* (June 1953) and *Bazar* (March 1952) respectively. The following analysis will focus on six stories—"La muerta," "El veraneo," "Rosamunda," "Un matrimonio," "El alivio" and "Recién casados"—that best represent Laforet's social commentary as portrayed in the struggle—ideological, physical and, in some cases, economic—to reconcile the role of women and the nature of their relationships with the oppressive expectations of an ultra-conservative culture. The pervasive theme of identity-development in Laforet's works and the author's attempt in life to determine her own role and personal philosophy in an ideologically-repressive dictatorship underscore the importance of this article's approach.²

While identity-development is not central to "La muerta," the significance of María's role and its impact on the family delicately challenge the ideals of Franco society's restrictive ideology. María is the regime's model spouse—the devoted and perpetually amiable mother and housewife, as Otero illustrates³—but her contributions do not earn her family's appreciation during most of her life. While this prompts the reader's sympathy, the narrative also draws pity for the husband Paco who has worked for decades like a "burro de carga" to provide both food for his family (*Novelas* 266)—which includes two bickering and unhelpful daughters—and medication for María who has battled numerous grave illnesses for the past 20 years. Paco has not shared his wife's admirable happiness during this difficult period, and to recover sacrificed pleasure, he plans to wed a neighbor, "una viuda de buenas carnes" (266), after María's death. Although the story does not allude to the embarrassing public reaction that a widower would provoke by re-marrying in 1950s Spain—as Rafael Torres describes⁴—, Laforet explains that Paco's change of heart instead results ultimately from appreciating his wife's effect on the family, particularly when after three years of paralysis, María miraculously walks again. Yet gratitude and change do not culminate until shortly thereafter when, with María's death, the daughters remarkably begin sharing household chores without argument, and their father, Paco, now motivated by renewed interest in his own children and grandchildren, consequently spends more of his free time at home as his desire to remarry disappears. Also reinforcing Paco's newfound esteem for his wife's virtues are his son-in-law's comments that María had been a saint.

The story's conclusion reiterates María's profound influence on each family member, and Paco realizes that her lingering spiritual presence in the house has consoled everyone since her death: "Quizá por eso había vivido y muerto ella, así, doliente y risueña, insignificante y magnífica" (270). On the surface "La muerta" certainly reflects Roman Catholic values of

charity and sacrifice—both Paco's and María's—in addition to the *Sección Femenina's* ideals of the woman as both "una sirvienta eterna, callada y obediente" (Gallego Méndez 89) and a "mujer fuerte y animosa" (Martín Gaité 40)—as evinced by an ill María's constant happiness and her immediate resumption of household chores when cured of paralysis. Such behavior by a woman also reflects fascist post-war Spain's emphasis on the "sonrisa femenina como panacea" as opposed to the highly undesirable "chicas con complejos" (39-40); juxtaposed with Paco's own "complejos"—his concealed thoughts about re-marrying—that society permits, María's conduct further exposes the culture's discriminating gender code. Furthermore, there is an even less noticeable but perhaps equally powerful, feminist message: despite her long-term illness, her apparent reliance on Paco to raise the children, and her submissive role, María was the family's true guiding force, and her undying optimism and mental strength in the face of death are responsible for the definitive change in her loved ones. Therefore, the final message, though subtle, actually serves to undermine the more obvious ant-feminist values that conservative society approves.

As in "La muerta," female sacrifice also elicits a male's appreciation in "El veraneo"—although not from the protagonist—and the story repeats the author's criticism of fascist-Spain's gender roles, which for women were essentially those of wife and mother.⁵ In "El veraneo," the underachieving protagonist, Juan Pablo, serves as a bitter reminder of the flaws in society's reinforcement of male privileges and its discouragement of female ambitions beyond the home. The protagonist is a talented writer, but he enjoys little success because he is lazy and over-indulges in the bohemian lifestyle. Underlining his professional failures is the futile sacrifice his family made to afford him his educational advantage: due to financial restraints, the mother only sent Juan Pablo to Madrid for further schooling, while his sister Rosa, an equally promising student, had to remain in her small coastal village to study teaching. Laforet's corresponding description of Rosa as "resuelta, original, independiente" (278), however, is not negative despite Franco Spain's maligning such feminist traits as pertaining to the liberal "vencidos," the losers (republicans) of the country's civil war. In contrast, the author's positive portrayal of these characteristics reveals her own views regarding the regime's strict expectations for women. Hindering the potential of Rosa's personality, nevertheless, is her unavoidable reliance on Juan Pablo's plans to bring her to Madrid and finance her continued education once he passed the competitive examinations and earned a teaching appointment. After Rosa secured her own teaching post in the village, Juan Pablo felt less pressure to pass the tests in Madrid, and he subsequently never fulfilled his sister's enduring wish to flee her provincial confines; this certainly conveys the author's profound message about the error in society's resolve to support male ambitions over women's professional aspirations.

At the story's opening when Juan Pablo takes a summer vacation from the city to visit Rosa in her town—11 years after she began her teaching appointment—she is still a teacher, but it is her "vocación de soltera" as a 30-year-old that most clashes with period norms (Martín Gaité 42). As Martín Gaité observes, "La que «iba para solterona» solía ser detectada por cierta intemperancia de carácter, por su intransigencia o por su inconformismo" (38), while Rafael Torres remarks that in Franco's Spain marriage was "... el fin único y último del hombre y de la mujer, sobre todo de la mujer..." (121).⁶ Juan Pablo's comments during the welcome-dinner Rosa has prepared further reveal social disapproval of her situation as well as Laforet's criticism of these views. First, he denigrates his sister's food, thereby belittling her domestic skills (which are indispensable for matrimony); then he denounces her physical appearance, thus referring to why he believes Rosa is still a "solterona": "Pero realmente aquí tenéis demasiada grasa.

Demasiada carne y patatas... A ti se te nota. Has perdido la línea" (*Novelas* 273). To society, however, Juan Pablo's own situation is almost less respectable than his sister's. In addition to lacking work, Juan Pablo himself is unwed, likely due to his culture's view of him as a dubious provider. Yet as mentioned previously, his shortcomings as a writer came more from indolence than from a lack of talent or uncontrollable social circumstances—support from family and his own aptitude afforded him all possible means for success—, and his current pessimism toward career and life only reinforces his failures: "Juan Pablo, que antes sabía admirar tan fervorosamente, no admiraba a nadie por el momento" (273). He is soured, but he feels no guilt for either his own failures or for his sister's unfulfilled existence.

Rosa, on the other hand, is still blinded by her adolescent admiration for her brother (a privileged male) and his artistic ability, and she therefore tries to avoid conversation about his disappointments. In some respects her perspective seems naïve, although it also reflects a kinder and more generous approach to Juan Pablo than his treatment of his own sister, and while she has also failed her potential by settling as a frustrated village schoolteacher whose "ilusiones reformistas" were rejected by the town (278), she does not convert her own feelings of inadequacy into criticism of her brother. Instead, she still hopes for the future prosperity of a man who has done nothing to make professional gains commensurate with the sacrifices his family made for him to succeed. On another level, however, Rosa's treatment of her brother seems to conform to the type of nurturing and supportive role any young sister or wife of the period would assume with a brother or spouse. In Juan Pablo's presence she seems to assume the aforementioned part of the "sirvienta eterna, callada y obediente" (Gallego Méndez 89) as if her failed past experiences bucking society's strict expectations have resigned her to a nature less assertive and independent than her more rebellious self of youth.

With these circumstances in tow and during the first full day of his summer visit with Rosa, Juan Pablo walks alone to the beach where he coincidentally meets the doctor of a nearby town. This encounter and the ensuing conversation provoke guilt for Juan Pablo as the doctor reveals that he dated Rosa years ago, but that she rejected his marriage proposal confident that her brother would succeed in Madrid and deliver her from the village. Rosa's resolve is indeed courageous as she independently dismisses this overwhelmingly powerful social expectation for all women that is marriage, particularly with someone who holds such a respected occupation. However and as previously discussed, Juan Pablo failed to bring his sister to the capital, yet 11 years after refusing marriage to a man who subsequently wed another and now has four children, Rosa continues to wait with childish optimism for her brother's aid. To avoid fault, Juan Pablo tells himself that Rosa could have left the town at will and that her departure did not rely upon his success, although such a rationalization ignores the period's negative attitudes toward assertive women. But after the doctor forces him to confront the truth, Juan Pablo cannot endure the resulting shame that his vacation reinforces. Therefore and instead of his originally planned visit of one month, he resolves to leave after less than two days: "De repente su oscuro cuchitril, su vida de pereza y de absoluta independencia se le apareció radiante de atracción y felicidad. Por algo no quería dejarla. Había que volver rápidamente en ella" (281).

As Roberta Johnson observes, this story indeed presents complex moral questions such as "Where does responsibility lie—in the individual or with society—for the individual's success or failure to realize personal dreams and potential?" (103). The possible answers are no less difficult, but they do emerge from the context of the consistent feminist messages and social criticism pervasive in Laforet's work.⁷ For one, the family's investment of their limited resources in Juan Pablo, the only son, complements the mores of a male-privileged society, but by using

male-biased criteria as the sole factors to determine the allocation of support, the family, though certainly subject to social expectations and pressure, is responsible for hindering the advancement of Rosa, an equally-talented child. Juan Pablo must recognize this injustice during his discussion with the doctor, but his ultimate reaction—to leave the village immediately—reflects both his refusal to accept fault and his subsequent desire to escape to his "privileged" yet unproductive existence in Madrid. In refusing to change his behavior to aid his sister, for whom he is also individually responsible, Juan Pablo not only reinforces and perpetuates Rosa's frustrated existence, but he also denies his own literary success that he and others had yearned. One answer to Johnson's insightful question, therefore, can be two-fold: society does bear some responsibility in denying Rosa's opportunity to go to Madrid 11 years earlier—the mother could not have been expected to defy Franco's social code and send her daughter instead of her son—but Juan Pablo's professional failures ultimately deny his sister's second chance of escape to the city, thereby reflecting his disregard for a universal code of moral responsibility that goes beyond the confines of ultra-conservative, fascist Spain.

The reader, however, still asks if Rosa herself deserves any blame for naïvely thinking her brother would assist her, a belief that erases the chance to marry the doctor. Although twice a victim to Juan Pablo's unachieved career, Rosa is also partially guilty of conforming to society's expectations. Marrying a physician who respected her intelligence and aspirations would have been far more beneficial than relying on the support of her sibling, especially since the doctor's appreciation for Rosa's mind is itself a strong statement against conservative views that saw "nada más detestable que una mujer intelectual" (Gallego Méndez 79).⁸ In summary, Laforet's message in "El veraneo" is subtle, complex, and powerful: the sexist values of society create an intricate web of deprivation for women who through their own ambitious efforts find themselves inadvertently helping to weave the very web they are trying to escape.

The story "Rosamunda" also addresses the theme of lost opportunity and elusive dreams. The protagonist Rosamunda shares her tale with a young soldier on a train while she returns home to southern Spain from a large city, presumably Madrid. She had spent time away from her husband—"un hombre brutal, sórdido y celoso" (307)—in the city following the death of her son Florisel, her only child. Felisa is the real name of the protagonist, but she refers to herself in third person as Rosamunda, an invented alter ego who strives to achieve what society and personal conditions deny for Felisa. The protagonist herself abhors the name Felisa for it represents the oppressive reality of her existence as an unhappy housewife. Rosamunda, on the other hand, idealizes her circumstances—such as the imaginary conversion of her uncouth husband, the butcher, into a prince of legend—to make life psychologically tolerable. With the death of her child, the protagonist left her husband for the city and reassumed the persona of Rosamunda, a role she apparently held during her youth when she, according to Felisa, was a successful actress and poet whom the public adored.

Although the story hints at female liberation, especially with the protagonist's courageous defiance of social norms in leaving her spouse to pursue a career in the capital, the reader knows that Felisa currently is returning home to her husband. Also, in question is to what degree the protagonist was successful during her homecoming in the city, despite claims that her alter ego has likely tainted. Felisa/Rosamunda explains to the soldier that she has decided to return not for the distraught tone of the butcher's pleading letters, but because Felisa's memory of her dead child is the tie that binds her to her spouse: "... ahora vuelvo a mi deber... Repartí mi fortuna entre los pobres y vuelvo al lado de mi marido como quien va a un sepulcro" (309). Contrasting this account is the author's explanation that Felisa has forgotten her horrible failure in the city

where she spent days living and eating with the poor while enduring the humiliation of friends who discounted her "proyectos fantásticos." Clearly, Rosamunda has usurped the protagonist's persona and continues to modify her vision of reality to cope with the grim and seemingly fateful aspects of her life that society and its norms clearly dictate. The letter from her husband is simply another excuse to choose the lesser of two evils: her miserable marriage over the metropolitan disillusionment.

Both accounts—Rosamunda's romanticized tale of her exploits in the city and Laforet's revelation of the truth—hold similar, gloomy messages, though their coexistence also reflects the author's self-proclaimed optimism infused throughout her work.⁹ The obvious meaning of these two versions is that society shackles the advance of the 1940s and 50s woman in Spain. Even with her fantasized events in the city, the protagonist still acknowledges the unavoidable power of marital responsibility leading her to abandon her beloved, "successful" vocation. Her actual horrific experience reflects society's disapproval of deserting her abusive husband to pursue a frivolous, self-fulfilling artistic career. As Martín Gaité observes, it was a wife's conjugal duty to tolerate marital hardships in postwar Spain (21); and with regard to a career, both the Catholic Church and the *Sección Femenina* viewed female emancipation—economic, social and physiological—as a grave danger for society since a woman's only place was "dentro de los muros del hogar" (Gallego Méndez 141). Therefore, social condemnation of the protagonist's ambitions is the denial of her financial autonomy, and the protagonist must consequently surrender her search for independence and return home.

Optimism, however, subtly emerges in the story's conclusion as the protagonist responds to the soldier's use of "usted" when he invites her to a doughnut at one of the train's stops: "—¿Convidarme? Muy bien, joven... Quizá sea la última persona que me convide... Y no me trate con tanto respeto, por favor. Puede usted llamarme Rosamunda... no he de enfadarme por eso" (309). As seen with Laforet's other protagonists such as Andrea and Marta in the novels *Nada* and *La isla y los demonios* respectively and Pepita in the novelette *El último verano*, fantasy and imagination are means by which the characters overcome difficult personal circumstances, namely their adverse living conditions. In contrast to Andrea, Marta and Pepita, Felisa's pursuit of the dream is not rewarded at the narrative's conclusion with the promise of physical freedom. Rather, Felisa must satisfy herself, which she does, with psychological independence she gains through consistent immersion in the imaginary persona of Rosamunda, as demonstrated in her self-identification to the soldier. Although she indeed recognizes her multiple failures in the city, she still seems to maintain hope for the future. The narrative also suggests that Felisa/Rosamunda's time away, an exercise in personal freedom albeit somewhat failed, has earned her some respect with her husband who in his letter pleading for her return "le pedía perdón y la perdonaba" (309), a repentant tone similar to that of the note Mercedes receives from her family in Laforet's novelette *La llamada*.¹⁰ Even if the butcher returns to his harsh ways, Felisa can still preserve some dignity in having achieved physical freedom, although short-lived, and in controlling her own imagination and desires despite the period's oppressive social code.

Finally, the reader cannot ignore the implications of the author's use of a young soldier as the protagonist's interlocutor. A clear symbol of the establishment, the soldier is not portrayed as a judgmental, outspoken agent of the regime. Rather, he is a passive listener who allows Felisa/Rosamunda to confess freely and without remorse her "scandalous," though exaggerated, exploits. However, in refraining from judgment, does the soldier exempt the protagonist's actions from society's expectations? Although relatively unobtrusive in this story, the young man's role

does support the author's message of female rights and essentially condones Felisa/Rosamunda's acts despite their apparent violation of Spain's conservative norms.

In "Un matrimonio," Pedro, the 23-year-old male protagonist, is not as fortunate as Felisa/Rosamundo in escaping the consequences of defying society's rules. Just until a few months before his current situation, however, Pedro had irresponsibly enjoyed the benefits that Spain's sexist code grants to single men of the middle and upper classes. As a care-free college student in Madrid, he ignored his studies and squandered his father's money on a frivolous lifestyle: "Sabía que no servía estudiar, por mucho que sus padres se empeñaran. Sólo que los estudios eran un pretexto para aquella agradable vida en Madrid" (331). Despite his reckless behavior, Pedro still saw a prosperous future for himself: once his father learned that his son had been falsifying his university academic reports, then he would simply bring Pedro home and give him a good job. Subsequently, Pedro would meet and marry an attractive rich girl, thereby satisfying his parents, especially his mother (Martín Gaité 114), and society's demands. While still at the university, however, he maintained a sexual relationship with a showgirl named Gloria. What Martín Gaité observes as a common belief in postwar Spanish society, although families like Pedro's would certainly not sanction the male child's contact with females of lower classes, it was understood that boys and young men would likely and inevitably experiment sexually with such women. Yet, it was also clear that the son—who according to Martín Gaité possessed "la naciente dualidad amor-sexo" (108)—would not confuse these covert sexual trials with real love. Pedro first seemed to conform to this philosophy as he saw his relationship with Gloria as a fleeting adventure of youth, and when Gloria became pregnant—for society a gross failure of a "decent" girl's responsibility to control her boyfriend's "exceso de pasión" (Martín Gaité 203)—he proposed an abortion to avoid obstacles for his future success.

Gloria's adamant and morality-laced refusal convinced Pedro that he really loved her, and he committed to marriage in defiance of his social class's norm to wed within the same socio-economic group. This noble and brave decision reflects a radical change in Pedro's beliefs since despite Gloria's reaction to the proposed abortion—which would have been illegal during the dictatorship, but feasible with Pedro's financial resources and the couple's willingness to accept the tremendous health risks for Gloria—Pedro could have easily abandoned her, an act that given the circumstances would not have been uncommon for the period (and a less risky plot than terminating the pregnancy). In committing to Gloria, however, Pedro's original scheme for a perpetually comfortable lifestyle was lost as he bore society's punishment: his parents disowned him, ceased financial support, and refused to recognize his wife and their newborn grandson. With the protagonist's bold vow to Gloria in the face of inevitable social backlash, Laforet not only makes an important ethical point regarding civil and personal responsibility, but she also challenges the period's dehumanizing, sexist Spanish attitudes of many young, middle and upper class men toward lower, working class women who were considered less valuable than the virgin prospects of a more "respectable" social group. In essence, at the beginning of the story Pedro exemplified everything that is ideologically misguided with the Franco era, but the protagonist's courageous decision to marry Gloria is an act of repentance for past behavior he implicitly recognizes as inappropriate; and he does not hesitate despite the great economic sacrifice that his marriage causes.

The story's conclusion reflects the radical shift of the protagonist from a life centered on the material to one focusing on true love toward a spouse and child. Although committing to marriage was ultimately Pedro's choice, it was Gloria, a woman, whose influence successfully converted the twisted ideology of a young man, despite the daunting consequences. Nevertheless,

Pedro's material sacrifice, that Gloria prompted, becomes a gain of spiritual gratification for husband and wife as well as the recognition of a grossly flawed social norm that helps perpetuate the oppression of women.

With "El alivio," and in contrast to the previously discussed stories, males are absent from the action, but their influence is still reflected in the repressive social ideals that the female characters uphold. The widow María Rosa de Lorenzo and her 40-year-old daughter Herminia, who seems to have never married, share quarters in a convent residence among approximately 20 other widows of the same socio-economic class. Their living as "señoras" in a convent reinforces the suffocating nature of the social code that they all conscientiously follow (23). At the story's opening, for example, María Rosa chastises her daughter for cleaning the silver tea set without gloves, a clear obsession with middle and upper class expectations about female beauty, in this case hands. The irony is that this mother's fixation on her daughter's appearance is partially connected to the past desire of marrying her child to a respectable suitor; but at age 40, Herminia is now too old to "enamorarse, casarse y tener todos los hijos que mandara Dios" (Torres 78), the regime's assignment for women. María Rosa's efforts to instill proper behavior and etiquette in her daughter now only serve to earn society's positive opinion of both herself and Herminia: "La señora de Lorenzo se comportaba como si cientos de espectadores estuviesen acechando continuamente la conducta de su hija y la suya para admirar o reprobar sus gestos, sus opiniones, sus palabras" (23). Such superficial practice of appearances is complemented as well by the other "señoras," all of whom now have "buenos muebles" but "poco dinero." Even during the "merienda" that Herminia and her mother host for several of the convent's other residents, conversation immediately focuses on their past experiences courting their deceased husbands and other suitors, another indication that they recognize their limited roles in society. Again, the actions and words of these women are simply exercises in maintaining façades to earn the good graces of society's perceptions.

To augment this subtle social criticism, Laforet uses insanity during the "merienda" to expose the falseness of the women's social veneers and in essence challenge a code of male-chauvinist society. Specifically, María Rosa loses her sense of proper decorum and reveals the truth about her guests: that the marchioness never had any suitors, that all her guests are ugly, that Mrs. Torrenegra was nicknamed "la mosca pesada," and various other hair-raising insults. The "mad" hostess's last act is an attempt to throw her silver tea set—an obvious symbol of society's obsession with appearances—out the window, but her guests restrain her as a sign of their collective inability to discard the oppressive norms. Laforet imbeds her message in "el alivio" that everyone present at the event subsequently experiences. For Herminia, and on a superficial level, her mother's lunacy excuses the scandalous deeds; but more profoundly, she views her mother's behavior as the exposure of flaws of all individuals who attempt to satisfy social expectations, a hint at the rampant hypocrisy of Spain's fascist society and corresponding ideology.¹¹ Herminia, therefore, who for years has tolerated her mother's criticism, is relieved in knowing that even the most respected persons cannot meet the unrealistic standards of society, despite physical appearances. Of course, María Rosa's "alivio" comes with the "madness" that allows her to violate the social mores without consequences and strip the façade of her company. Even the guests themselves find relief rather than insult in the host's temporary removal of the asphyxiating code: "Estaban conmovidas, llenas de piedad y casi de alegría por lo inusitado del caso" (23).

In "Recién casados," however, the sole female character finds little relief from social norms. Although the narrative focuses primarily on the relationship between Alfredo, the

woman's husband, and Paco Álvarez, Alfredo's inefficient employee, the woman's additional part as narrator allows significant commentary on the restricted female in Franco's Spain. Recently moved to Madrid because of Alfredo's job-transfer—yet another example of Spain's male-dominated society dictating the course of a female's personal and social lives—the woman now finds herself caught in a monotonous routine as a childless newly wed who not only longs for her lost provincial life, but whose only friend in the city is her husband, a man who talks almost exclusively about his work. Clearly the couple's lack of children reinforces her social isolation and feelings of inadequacy since conservative society expects married women to fulfill their maternal mission (Gallego Méndez 141). Further exacerbating these feelings is the episode that reminds the reader of the norm-abiding woman's overwhelming reliance on the man: one afternoon while finishing tea with his wife at a nearby café, Alfredo realizes that he forgot his wallet, and when he asks his spouse if she has money to pay the bill, she responds "Ni un céntimo" (20). This terse reply displays both the woman's lack of financial autonomy as well as her total dependence on her husband to rescue both of them from an embarrassing social situation—that she is nameless in the story reinforces her reliant state. While Alfredo's discomfort is clearly tied to the appearance that financially he is an irresponsible spouse—suggesting he is an inadequate provider—the wife's embarrassment stems in addition from this reminder of her economic vulnerability and male-dependence. With the possibility that Alfredo might leave her to retrieve his wallet from their distant apartment, the woman responds in a panic driven by public perception: "—Por Dios... No me dejes sola... Las señoras de la mesa de enfrente se van a extrañar muchísimo...." Aggravating the narrator's predicament is her desperate need to uphold the social custom that someone must accompany a married woman in such a social setting.

The wife's suggestion that Alfredo call Paco for help allows the employee to exercise revenge on his boss, which Paco does by deliberately arriving late with the needed cash. Although the act signifies a sort of victory for the economically oppressed (Paco the employee) over the oppressor (Alfredo the boss), since it transpires between men, it has little effect on the woman's situation. Comically, Alfredo does not perceive the reprisal because while recognizing his poor treatment of Paco just hours before, he later feels guilty after his employee finally brings the money. The narrator is aware of the employee's vengeful intention because Paco tells her in confidence, but she conceals it from her own husband in order to carry on the men's foolish game and reinforce her husband's changed feelings toward Paco. Essentially, the narrator herself has also fallen victim to this deceit by withholding the truth from her spouse, but in doing so she also successfully implements some control over the individuals in her life, an exercise in empowerment, though minimum, that affords her a bit of satisfaction and self-worth. It is the relative triviality of this female control that protests the unfortunate, restricted role of women in post-war Spain.

Of Laforet's 14 published short stories, the six discussed here are the best examples of the author's feminist and social messages riddled throughout her work. In each of these six tales, society defines the woman's roles while the male characters generally have the most power to concede modifications to these roles, although occasionally assertiveness, imagination and ambitious dreams of self-fulfillment can serve as important mechanisms for the woman's own attempts to liberate herself—either physically or psychologically—from restrictive, socially-imposed responsibilities. Like many of the works of other Spanish postwar women writers such as Ana María Matute, Carmen Martín Gaité, Dolores Medio, Elena Quiroga and Mercè Rodoreda, among others,¹² these six short stories by Laforet reflect the same concern for what Galdona

Pérez calls "...una falta de libertad que anula aspectos fundamentales de la personalidad femenina; esa *(des)figurada (persona)lidad* de la mujer..." (110); and instead of fading from the literary stage after her initial and famous novel *Nada* (1945)—as many critics have consistently asserted¹³—, with her short stories Laforet is an important collaborator in Spain's feminist discourse of the period. As scholars continue to re-examine this author's overlooked works such as her short stories, novelettes and the four novels that follow *Nada*, they will observe that Laforet conveys important feminist and social commentaries that support her prominence among her female contemporaries.

Notes

- (1) Illanes Adaro's *La novelística de Carmen Laforet* (1971) devotes an entire chapter—"Los relatos breves"—to the short stories, but it mainly provides plot summaries while emphasizing Laforet's sense of humor and her "deseo de relacionar los sucesos a lo colectivo" (86). A more recent study by Luis María Quintana Tejera (1997) also lacks a thorough analysis of the tales' social messages. However, in her 1981 book *Carmen Laforet*, Roberta Johnson insightfully addresses many of the short stories' central themes while leaving the door open for further critical exploration of the social issues that Laforet raises.
- (2) For studies on identity development in Laforet's *Nada*, *La isla y los demonios* and *La insolación*, see Del Mastro's articles.
- (3) Luis Otero's book *Mi mamá me mimó* presents an excellent overview of the woman's role in Franco's Spain.
- (4) Rafael Torres explains: "A los viudos que contraían matrimonio se les dedicaban espantosas cencerradas, una especie de impuesto revolucionario que la comunidad les cobraba por repetir y que consistía en un horrisono batir de cacerolas, petardos e imprecaciones ante la casa en la que se estaba consumando el vínculo" (121).
- (5) Torres observes that "... la misión que el régimen había endilgado a la mujer era, exclusivamente, la de enamorarse, casarse y tener todos los hijos que mandara Dios" (78). Reinforcing the importance of this mission for women was the *Sección Femenina*, which was founded by the right-wing *Falange española* in 1934, and complemented the philosophy of both Franco's dictatorship and the Roman Catholic Church during the following four decades. For more on the *Sección Femenina*, see studies by Gallego Méndez and Suárez Fernández.
- (6) Gallego Méndez also notes the restricted options for women in 1940s and 50s Spain: "Obviamente, era preferible que la mujer alcanzara el estado en que pudiera cumplir su misión: la maternidad. Y ello solo era posible a través del matrimonio" (141).
- (7) See Johnson's book *Carmen Laforet* for a thorough overview of Laforet's works with the exception of the novel *Al volver la esquina*, which was not published until May 2004.
- (8) With regard to period views toward female intellect, Martín Gaité explains that society frowned upon women who embraced political ideals: "Porque de la pasión por una idea se podía llegar incluso al crimen" (70).
- (9) Laforet labels herself an optimist in her interview with Marie-Lise Gazarian (163).
- (10) Mercedes, like Rosamunda, abandons her abusive spouse and restrictive home-life to pursue dreams of becoming an actress in the city, namely Barcelona. Acting is one of several creative arts such as painting, writing and music that Laforet uses consistently in her works to afford her characters an avenue for free expression and temporary escape from undesirable circumstances.
- (11) Torres and Martín Gaité, among many others, document numerous examples of the ubiquitous hypocrisy of post-1939 Spain where society struggled unsuccessfully to conform to the rigorous and unrealistic norms of "nacionalcatolicismo" (Torres 76).
- (12) See de la Fuente's study on women writers of postwar Spain.
- (13) Although Laforet's recent passing on February 28, 2004 has likely motivated scholars to re-discover the author's production after *Nada*, the critics' persistent focus on the author's 1945 novel is clear: of those articles dated from 1964-2005 and listed in the Modern Language Association's International Bibliography at the writing of this essay, 41 examine *Nada* vs. only eight devoted to Laforet's other works (three on *La isla y los demonios*, one on *La mujer nueva*, two on *La insolación* and two on *Paralelo* 35). While the MLA certainly is not a comprehensive

directory for studies on Laforet, it is a reliable indicator of the scholarly perspective on the author. Also telling are the observations on Laforet found in Pérez and Ihrle's *The Feminist Encyclopedia of Spanish Literature*: "Best known for her internationally acclaimed novel *Nada...*, " and "... this more productive than generally recognized writer..." (332-33). Pérez and Ihrle evidently recognize the lopsided critical focus on *Nada*.

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