

# Identity, and its fragmentation, in 'nada'



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In Carmen Laforet's *Nada*, the orphan Andrea arrives in Barcelona full of optimism about her new life in the city. Many critics claim that the novel is a 'bildungsroman', a coming-of-age story where the protagonist, an adolescent, matures into adulthood and finds her identity. However, surrounded by a family characterized by fragmentation in the decadence of post-war Spain, it is arguable that Andrea is unable to find a stable, secure identity and leaves the city with the same childish naivety with which she arrived.

There is a sense of repression of true identity throughout the novel, which changes form as the plot develops. The book is split into three distinct parts, the first of which ends with the departure of Angustias to the convent. In this first part, it seemed as though Andrea's aunt was the main barrier separating her from the possibility of independence and maturity and also the force that inflicted feelings of anxiety and guilt onto herself. Although Andrea arrived in Barcelona hoping to lead the liberated life of a university student, as soon as she arrived at the Calle Aribau she met with a sort of prison, full of fragmented characters whose repressed desires and drives had driven them to darkness, violence and depravity. However, even after Angustias' departure, Andrea finds that as long as she is in the calle de Aribau she will never be able to find independence- she is allowed to have her aunt's old room, but finds that not only does Román often come in without warning to rummage amongst the clutter that fills the room, but the bedroom itself sits in the middle of the house and from it Andrea cannot escape from all the goings-on around her, especially the disputes between Gloria and Juan.

The expressionist, gothic descriptions of Aribau are often related to a sort of suffocation, implying that the true identities of the characters have been smothered and deformed: ' en el piso un calor sofocante como si el aire estuviera estancado y podrido'[1]. This stands in stark contrast to the impressionist descriptions of the beach, the time spent at which is associated with light and nature- ' Toda la semana parecía alboreada por ellos... me hizo ella ver un Nuevo sentido de la Naturaleza en el que ni siquiera había pensado'[2]. The traditional link between light and darkness, the natural and the gothic could be seen to translate to the stifling of any identity Andrea might have hoped to find during her time at Aribau, and that the possibility of developing a mature identity is only possible during the time spent without her family and, more significantly, with Ena. Furthermore, it is paradoxical that Andrea was specifically excited by the idea of coming to Barcelona, a buzzing and lively city, and yet it is mostly only when she leaves the city to go to the beach or the country that she feels most happy and liberated. Thus it is clear, both from the language of oppression and suffocation in the calle Aribau and the semantic fields of light and darkness that if Andrea has any hope of developing into a young woman and assuming the identity she so desperately desires, it cannot happen in the filthy, ghostliness of Aribau.

Fragmentation of the self is very closely related to the notion of identity in Nada. Throughout the novel, right up until the closing pages, Andrea shows a distinct and crucial split between interior and exterior, a split that fundamentally stops her from achieving her longing to be an attractive, desired and mature woman. From the first meeting with Ena, she tries

desperately to keep her two worlds apart; indeed, she is ashamed of her family at Aribau, especially after she sees the high-bourgeois life led by Ena in Vía Layetana. Andrea's home represents a family in crisis after the upheaval and destruction of the Spanish Civil War, it lacks a male head of household and its family members are only just scraping together enough money to subsist, Juan as a poorly paid nightwatchman and Gloria by secretly gambling. On the other hand, Andrea's family represents the model family of the new Francoist order who live a comfortable and liberal life as part of Spain's new entrepreneurial elite[3]. Perhaps it is here, in the deep-seated social fragmentation of post-war Spain, where Andrea's inability to act upon her dreams and desires finds its source. In her mind, Andrea wants to be the sophisticated woman that Ena embodies and Román wants as a companion. For a while, she keeps up the façade of being a refined young lady, 'yo me daba cuenta de que él me creía una persona distinta; mucho más formada, y tal vez má inteligente'[4], but her feelings of inferiority and inadequacy show through and Román soon labels her as a child. Although these feelings re-surface numerous times in the novel, never do they as strongly as at Pon's ball where Andrea leaves on account of her cheap and dirty shoes and the feeling of estrangement she gets from being surrounded by a bourgeois social class. For Andrea, part of the identity she wants to acquire is equated with surpassing the class boundary between herself and the likes of Pons and Ena. Thus arguably it is social fragmentation that obstructs the way between childhood and womanhood.

However, Andrea's remarkable childish passivity is also prominent and it is arguably this which means she is unable to assume the identity that she

wants. She very rarely takes an active role in things that may concern her development, such as at Pon's ball where she actually makes no effort whatsoever to mingle with the other guests or dance with Pons. Even the mature Andrea who is narrating the story shows the childish trait of constantly trying to avoid taking responsibility for the role of 'espectadora' she has found herself in. She seems to blame the social and familial fragmentation that surrounds her as well as seeing her position as pre-determined and unchangeable: 'unos seres nacen para vivir, otros para trabajar, otros para mirar la vida. Yo tenía un pequeño y ruin papel de espectadora. Imposible salirme de él. Imposible libertarme.' However, as the reader, we get a sense of her childish passivity and even when she is given opportunities to break out of her shell and become an active agent in influencing events, she does not have the courage to do so. She is given two mediating roles in the novel, one by her grandmother to mediate between Gloria and Juan in one of their disputes, and another by Margarita to protect Ena from Román. In both of these roles she fails to embrace the mature identity she desires and her childish side overcomes her. Furthermore, we get the sense that any progress made in the novel towards a stable and secure identity is not the result of her actions but of Ena, who acts like a kind of fairy godmother[5] to save Andrea from situations she cannot deal with and offer her a brighter future. When Andrea flees Román's room, it is Ena's phone call which saves her from her fear and insomnia, and then again at the end of the book it is Ena's letter which allows her to escape from the 'chillidos históricos'[6] of the house on Airbau. So even if by the end of the novel, Andrea's fortunes seem to have changed and she appears to have surpassed the rigid social boundary that she felt trapped by earlier in the

novel, it is not of her own doing and, like a child still, she was helped out of her miserable situation by someone who is able to assume the identity of a mature young woman.

The idea of fragmentation of the self is reinforced by looking at the way Andrea takes features of others, mostly Ena but also Román to a degree, and sees in them characteristics she herself would like to have. Ena is a projection of the identity that Andrea lacks, she embodies the courage, attractiveness and sensuality that the protagonist wishes she was capable of having. Similarly, Román, although flawed, represents the cultured, sophisticated personality that Andrea desires for herself. The narrator, by raising these other characters into semi-divinity and openly presenting them as her dream self, she emphasizes her own lack of identity and reveals yet another layer of fragmentation. More than simply the split between her thoughts and her actions, Andrea actually shows a desire to live through others and embody other identities. She own personality recedes into 'nada', as her notion of self is fragmented, projected onto others and lacking presence and stability. She is so consumed by her deep sense of inferiority that she is unable to form a coherent, secure self.

There is, however, evidence that Andrea does find some sort of identity in the year she lived at Aribau. In many ways, she is a maternal figure to the inhabitants of Aribau. Even at the first meeting with her grandmother, she mentions how 'Sentí palpitar su corazón como un animalillo contra mi pecho'[7]. She provides psychological integrity for the fragmented family, which lacks a male head of household and whose current maternal figure has been reduced to a 'mancha blanquinegra de una viejicita decrepita'[8]. She

sees through Angustias' attempts to assume the role of authoritarian mother and she provides a refuge and comfort for Gloria after her fights with her husband. Furthermore, when she runs after Juan into the barrio gótico she says 'corrí en su persecución como si en ello me fuera la vida'[9]. She helps him escape from the police and then cares for him: 'Le saqué un pañuelo del bolsillo para que se limpiara la sangre que le goteaba sobre el ojo. Se lo até y luego se apoyó en mi hombro'[10]. She may not have saved anyone in Aribau, but she provides some force for stability in their fragmented lives, and although Andrea does not find an adult identity in sexual terms, she shows these maternal traits which show steps towards taking responsibility for herself and others and leaving childhood behind. It is even arguable that Andrea actually actively turns away from trying to predatory male sexuality, as we see from her meeting with Gerado she still find sexual contact repelling, and embraces pre-adolescent innocence. Furthermore, she finds her own unique place in the fragmented post-war society by turning to female friendship instead of one of the 'dos caminos honrosos'[11], marriage or the convent, as prescribed by Angustias. Thus, arguably Andrea does to some extent find an identity during her time at Aribau, even if it is not the one she had in mind, and in this sense Nada is legitimized as a bildungsroman.

Although in some ways Andrea does find a place for herself within the social fragmentation that surrounds her, she does by no means find a stable and secure identity or sense of self. This is partly due to the repression of desires and natural identity she finds in the house on Aribau, as well as the complete split between the disjointed, violent life led by a family broken by the effects

of the Civil War and the liberal stability of the new high-bourgeois family idealized by Franco. However, it is largely also a result of Andrea's passivity and total fragmentation of self, her mistake of dreaming up identities and projecting them onto the people around her, leading to a total lack of any coherent self and leaving her identity scattered and unachievable. She leaves Barcelona as childishly full of illusions about the future as when she arrived, and she says ' marchaba sin haber conocido nada de lo que confusamente esperaba'[12]. The novel has come full circle and there has been no restoral of order and wholeness.

[1] LAFORET, C. *Nada* (Ediciones Destino, 1995) p16 [2] *ibid.* p130-131 [3] JORDAN, B. *Critical Guides to Spanish Texts: Nada* (Grant & Cutler, 1993) p10 [4] LAFORET, C. *Nada*. p38 [5] JORDAN, B. *Critical Guides to Spanish Texts: Nada*. p54 [6] LAFORET, C. *Nada*. p265 [7] *ibid.* p19 [8] *ibid.* p15 [9] *ibid.* p161 [10] *ibid.* p166 [11] *ibid.* p94 [12] *ibid.* p275

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