Episode 7: Oxford Spanish Literature Podcast

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 00:02

Ever wondered what it would be like studying Spanish at the University of Oxford? Sit in on my conversations with Spanish tutors to find out what's so fascinating about the literature they teach, why they love teaching it, and why they think you might love it too.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 00:15
Hi Daniela, how you doing?

Daniela Omlor 00:17
Yeah, I'm okay, thank you. How are you?

Christy Callaway-Gale 00:19
Yeah fine, thank you. How have things been now term's started up again for you?

Daniela Omlor 00:25
So far, so good.

[CONVERSATION FADES OUT]

Daniela Omlor 00:27
So I'm Daniela Omlor. I'm the Spanish Fellow at Lincoln College, but I'm also a Lecturer at Jesus College. I have a role in the Faculty as Associate Professor. And I, mainly, for my research, look at modern Spain, so literature coming out of modern Spain. In particular, I'm interested in the 20th and 21st century.

Christy Callaway-Gale 00:50
Brilliant. So what's the name of the text we'll be speaking about today and who wrote it?

Daniela Omlor 00:56
So the text I've chosen is called *Nada*, which is short and sweet! It's a novel and it's written in the first person, by an author called Carmen Laforet.

Christy Callaway-Gale 01:07
And what's the basic plot?

Daniela Omlor 01:09
So as the title might already tell us, there isn't necessarily that much of a plot to it. The main plot consists of the narrator, a young woman called Andrea, coming to Barcelona to study at university. And...other than that, it's mainly about the people she meets, about kind of reconnecting with her family with whom she lives, and things like friendship, and so on.

Christy Callaway-Gale 01:37
And so why did you want to talk about this particular text?

Daniela Omlor 01:41
One thing that I think is really interesting about this text is actually that, what the narrator in some ways is experiencing also corresponds a little bit to what any kind of undergraduate goes through, because, you know, she's...she's moving to go to university, she's away from, you know, where she's grown up for the first time and she's sort of trying to figure out who she is, what she wants to do and...and, in a sense, what it means to be an adult as well, I think.

Christy Callaway-Gale 02:13
So when and where was the text written and what was happening at the time?

Daniela Omlor 02:18
Laforet said that she started writing when she was twenty-two. She was born in 1921. And in the end, the novel was published in 1945, although it won a very prestigious prize prior to publication. Even though the Spanish Civil War had finished…you know, had ended in 1939, it was of course very much still something that affected everyday life in Spain. And we can also think about the fact more globally that World War Two only ended in 1945, so by all means it was a time that, in world history, was very tumultuous and lots of things were happening.

Christy Callaway-Gale 02:58
And so what sort of literature, and maybe specifically novels, were being written in Spain at this time and how does this novel compare to those?

Daniela Omlor 03:08
Well, I think we tend to think of the Civil War as a big, sort of, break in the history of...not just Spain as a nation but also Spanish literature. So, I mean, I'm always generalising, but let's say before the Civil War, you know, literature was overall quite experimental. You know, the avant-garde was very active in Spain as well. In general terms, people tend to think of the text[s] being written after the Civil War, within Spain—so not by writers who had chosen to go into exile—as relatively unexciting, let's put it that way. So quite, sort of, conventional. And while, at first glance, it's easy to think the same thing about *Nada*, I think, actually when…when we take a closer look, it's...it's quite a bit more exciting than that. And it's...it's trying to offer a, kind of, different view of reality. She's very good at capturing not just the facts of society and the world around us, but...but also our kind of emotional response to it.

Christy Callaway-Gale 04:20
Definitely. And I think we'll talk a bit more about that later when we get into some detail on the text, but first, let's move to talk a bit about the author Laforet and her works. So *Nada* is her first novel, I think, so what else did Laforet go on to write and how does *Nada* fit into the trajectory of her time as an author?

Daniela Omlor 04:44
I think in many ways Laforet was unlucky because her first novel was so critically acclaimed and successful that what...what...what she continued to write was...has often been overlooked. And she wasn't very prolific, so there's a tendency to, sort of, think of her as a...as a, kind of, "one-day wonder" or something like that, but she was obviously someone who never stopped writing and it was really important to her, to the extent that she actually abandoned all the, kind of, degrees that she started at university, never...never finished them and, you know...and instead took up writing full time. So, we have a bit of a skewed view of her development, I think, because, funnily enough, her first novel was so...it seemed to overshadow everything that followed.

Christy Callaway-Gale 05:36
Hmm. And, because she's not that prolific, do we have any idea which authors and other texts might have influenced her work, or are we kind of in the dark when it comes to that?

Daniela Omlor 05:48
Well, I mean, if…if we look at *Nada*, the first thing we see is actually a quotation that's taken from a poem. So interestingly, she's using a poem written by Juan Ramón Jiménez, who sort of fits in with what I was saying about the literature produced in Spain before the Civil War. He was very much associated with the avant-garde, or even the precursor of that in that he was seen as a...the prime poet to be producing "pure poetry" in Spain, and therefore was a big influence on the avant-gardes that followed...followed him. So that's interesting because he's someone who went into exile and obviously, again, one would think that perhaps just their modes of writing would be so different that, that wasn't necessarily something that was going to be a lasting influence on her. And I think the other thing that is maybe not made explicit, but that we come to think about a little bit in the novel is this, kind of, existentialist outlook that sometimes...seems to be simmering in the background really.

Christy Callaway-Gale 07:07
Great, so let's move on now, I think, to look at the text in a bit more detail. Could you tell us a bit more about who narrates this text? And what can we say about this narrative voice?

Daniela Omlor 07:18
So the narrator is the young woman, Andrea, who's been spending the time of the Civil War on an island, which isn't specified in the text, and she arrives in Barcelona to go to university—she has some funding for that—and she's staying with her family (but not her parents because we're told she's an orphan), but her aunt and her uncles and her grandmother in a house that she has very fond memories of from before the Civil War. But actually, you know, quite some time has passed since her last being there. Because we have a first-person narrator everything is filtered through this narrator who's also to an extent our protagonist, Andrea, so by definition things will be more subjective than if we had a third-person narrator. As a result, it also means that we're not completely in the know, when things are happening. A lot of the time, the narrator will report conversations, and so on, that she's

overheard, so she may have missed something, and as the reader we have to make that imaginative leap in the same way that the narrator has to. And we also get direct access to her thoughts, of course, because she is a first-person narrator so we get a good sense of her inner world and, a lot of the time, the descriptions of what she sees, or what she observes and witnesses, or possibly takes part in are filtered through her state of mind, so they're quite subjective in that way and sometimes even...even poetic and can be...can be quite dense. Even though I would say that the language isn't over the top, the language is more quotidian, perhaps.

Christy Callaway-Gale 09:06
And when you're reading the novel, I think you do get the sense that the narrator, Andrea, is maybe a bit lonely and is also searching for a sense of self. And I wondered how the idea of loneliness and a search for identity is explored in this text, in your opinion?

Daniela Omlor 09:27
I think...one important thing to remember is that Andrea, at the point where she arrives in Barcelona, is very young. So she's sort of...in a li[...], she…she finds herself a little bit in limbo, because obviously she is no longer a child, but in some ways she also doesn't quite fit into the world of adults. And in terms of her search for an identity, I think she comes up against expectations of society, of her family and so on that previously maybe she hadn't considered. I think she arrives with a kind of feeling of elation in Barcelona, thinking she can be anyone she wants to be and then she suddenly finds that she comes up against lots of stereotypes or, or conventions, or expectations that are to do with the fact that she's a young woman, that she's of a particular social class and so on that probably hadn't crossed her mind before then.

Christy Callaway-Gale 10:26
And as you say, she's a young woman, and we see most of the story through her eyes. So what can we say about maybe a female gaze or a female perspective in the novel?

Daniela Omlor 10:40
I think that's one of the most interesting things about it: the fact that we have a female narrator and that this is not a female narrator who maybe fulfills any of the kind of stereotypes that we might have. She doesn't seem like a sort of woman that is conservative and Catholic, and so on, and she's a...she's an intelligent, curious person, but also someone who's...who's quite damaged in some way, even though we...we're not entirely sure why, but she's vulnerable and, at the same time, she...she has a hunger for life, so...so I think that makes her really interesting. And what she sees, of course, in the world, post war in Barcelona, is that men are allowed to behave differently to women and that her freedom is actually coretai[...]...curtailed by the fact that she is a woman.

Christy Callaway-Gale 11:39
Hmm. And I was wondering whether you think the concept of masculinity is also explored in the novel, because Andrea's two uncles, Roman and Juan, feature quite prominently in the novel and they're quite a foreboding presence in the house?

Daniela Omlor 11:54
Yeah, so I think men, in a...in a sort of similar way to women, come up against certain expectations. So I think the two uncles haven't emerged from the war as these kind of victorious fighters that...that we might imagine them to be and they really struggle with that. And one way in which they try to take control is often through violence, so

violence seems to be the language that is acceptable in men and a way in which they try and assume control over events that perhaps aren't really in their control. And so when they're trying to place themselves above the female members of the household, I think this is often to do with the fact that, that's the only way in which they...they can sort of overcome their own impotence within that society.

Christy Callaway-Gale 12:50
And I think from my perspective, maybe the most powerful relationship in the novel is between Andrea and her friend Ena. And, when I read the text, I got the impression that Andrea was attracted to Ena, or maybe even in love with her, and I wondered whether there's a queer reading of Andrea's character?

Daniela Omlor 13:09
I think that's a really interesting reading and a queer reading is certainly possible. What I find a little bit less convincing about that is actually, that when it comes to female friendship, that's the first thing that critics try and think about. Their friendship is very intense and I think what's also interesting, or what we should bear in mind, is that, in literature, we don't have an abundance of depictions of female friendship. So in that sense, actually, the novel...the novel offers us something unique. I think it also speaks to their age. I think, as a woman, I don't know, I think we can think of, sort of, friendships in adolescence that just have that intensity, of almost a kind of love relationship without necessarily having...having, you know, having to...perhaps also, but I mean, not...not necessarily having to have any kind of erotic underpinnings. I think the other thing that's interesting is that, because we have Andrea as a narrator, we always see Ena through her eyes. So the view of Ena's actually...we can't sort of verify it independently from the way in which Andrea perceives her. So the fact that she really idolizes Ena, because in some ways Ena's everything that she's not, they are a little bit like day and night, Ena's popular, she's beautiful, she's rich. That's also a fantasy, which I think is really interesting, so in some ways, I think, Andrea projects a lot on to Ena that maybe tells us more about Andrea's own desires of who she would like to be or, you know, the sort of fantasies she has of...of 'being' which again, I think, when we're at that threshold between childhood, adolescence and adulthood, I think is not uncommon.

Christy Callaway-Gale 15:13
I think you just described brilliantly that intensity that exists in the friendship between Andrea and Ena and I think, more generally, there's quite a claustrophobic atmosphere, I'd say, in the novel and specifically in the house where Andrea lives where a lot of the novel takes place. Why do you think Laforet chooses to build this sort of atmosphere in the novel?

Daniela Omlor 15:37
I think, one reason why she's doing that is to emphasise the fact that Andrea does feel very lonely. And by creating such a stifling and claustrophobic atmosphere...I mean, partly, I think, perhaps she's...Laforet is conveying what...what society was like, you know, in the wake of...of a very bloody war and so on. But on the other hand, I think it's very much about Andrea's personal experience, the fact that she doesn't seem to sort of be in sync with any...any of the...of the people she lives with. She doesn't really understand them, and they...they don't understand her and...and...and the kind of environment also doesn't live up to...to her expectation, her almost...her...her...her dreams of when...when she was there as a child and it was this sort of wonderful place that she wants to return to. So in a sense, symbolically, you could also say that, it just shows us the failure of, or the possibility of, returning to a sort of nostalgic place that perhaps only exists in our memory.

Christy Callaway-Gale 16:45
And, as we've touched on already, Andrea's family struggles for money a lot throughout the novel. And this at least appears to contrast to the families of the friends that Andrea falls in with at university, like Ena's family. Do you think the idea, or the concept of, social class and wealth is explored in the text?

Daniela Omlor 17:08
I think money's important, because it's an everyday worry for Andrea's family. It's not an abstract concept, it's really about how to pay for the next meal, what happens if, you know, someone's ill, and so on, so it's a sort of household concern and there are moments when Andrea almost self-harms, we could probably say, because she starves herself in order to be able to afford other things that...that Ena can easily afford and so on. She wants to sort of keep up with what the others are doing. But she also gets a sort of pleasure out of doing that, so that's probably an aside. And for...for Ena's family, it's just simply not something that they ever have to think about. And I think another interesting facet we're...we're shown is that, a lot of the children of the Barcelona bourgeoisie, so the sort of peers of Andrea at university, tend to be able to literally afford a quite liberal mindset. They're sort of non-conformist and they like to sort of play the revolutionary in their political ideals and their...their outlooks when it comes to literature and so on but actually, in the end, they all have that safety net of knowing that their families are well-connected and wealthy. So it's just a kind of posturing that...that they are able to adopt that Andrea observes without really...well I think she...she lays bare quite...quite well through her detached observation what is actually going on; whereas these fellow students of hers tend to think of themselves as...as really being very daring in what they're doing.

Christy Callaway-Gale 19:05
And I think like you say, because Andrea spends a lot of time observing people and we're kind of party to her internal thoughts, I think in terms of the way externally she expresses herself, silence does feature a lot in the text. And I wondered if you could speak a bit more about the significance of silence and maybe some of the different ways that that's conveyed in the text and for different purposes?

Daniela Omlor 19:31
Well, it's very difficult to talk about silence in a text because, of course, it's something that in some ways isn't there, but I think it's an absence that becomes a presence. So the...one way in which silence is marked in the text is fragmentation, so the fact that we have kind of glimpses, or almost snippets, of conversations or perceptions or observations, but we don't ever have a kind of three-hundred-and sixty-degree view of something. So there's an act of, sort of, active reading that's necessary in order to sort of put things together. A lot of the silence is also to do with things that people don't want to talk about because they don't like to remember them necessarily, or they have accepted that in the society that they live in are not deemed to be things that should be talked about. So, some of that is to do with the war but some of that is also to do with interpersonal relationships and how they develop on the backdrop of a...sort of different political system, perhaps.

Christy Callaway-Gale 20:46
And thinking more now about the impact of the text in the literary world, how did this text shape literature written in the Spanish language going forwards?

Daniela Omlor 20:55
Probably the most important influence it had was that women writers often felt that they had nowhere to look, but some of them described the discovery of *Nada* as a kind of epiphany. Carmen Martín Gaite said that it was really great for her to discover Andrea as this protagonist because she wasn't modeled on the…the heroines that particularly female writers were encouraged to identify with in what was called the *novela rosa* (a kind of romance literature we would call it nowadays) that was meant to be good for women, because it would prepare them for marriage and...and, you know, wouldn't...wouldn't make them sort of stray from...from expectation. And I think in that sense, *Nada* showed women writers what it was possible to do, that they didn't have to try and write in a particular mould, that they could do other things.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 21:53
A big part of studying Spanish at Oxford is looking at literary texts in a lot of detail. So I'm asking Daniela to pick out an extract from the novel, so we can analyse it a bit more closely.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Daniela Omlor 22:07
So this is an extract from quite early on in the novel. Andrea has just arrived at her family's house and she...she decides to take a shower after her travels.

Daniela Omlor 22:19
'Parecía una casa de brujas aquel cuarto de baño. Las paredes tiznadas conservaban la huella de manos ganchudas, de gritos de desesperanza. Por todas partes los desconchados abrían sus bocas desdentadas rezumantes de humedad. Sobre el espejo, porque no cabía en otro sitio, habían colgado un bodegón macabro de besugos pálidos y cebollas sobre fondo negro. La locura sonreía en los grifos torcidos. Empecé a ver cosas extrañas como los que están borrachos. Bruscamente cerré la ducha, el cristalino y protector hechizo, y quedé sola entre la suciedad de las cosas.'

Daniela Omlor 23:00
So, 'this bathroom seemed like a witch's hut. The blackened walls preserved the traces of hooked hands and screams of despair. Everywhere the chipped walls were opening their toothless mouth, oozing with humidity. Above the mirror, because there wasn't space for it anywhere else, they had put a macabre still life of breams that were pale and onions on a black backdrop. Madness was laughing from the twisted taps. I began to saw very strange things, like those people who are drunk. Abruptly, I switched off the shower—that protective and crystalline spell—and there I remained alone amongst the...the dirtiness of things'.

Christy Callaway-Gale 23:57
Hmm. And thinking about language and imagery in this passage, what sort of language is used? Is there anything you want to pick out in particular?

Daniela Omlor 24:08
Well, we tend to think of this text as realist, but actually when we look at the language used it's not an objective language that we would use to describe a bathroom. So a lot of it is almost taken from the language of fairy tales. So if we look at 'brujas' ('witches'), even these sort of traces of hands, the imprints that she talks about, the fact that they're hooked, and so on, it's...it's either, kind of, fairy tales in the sense of a, kind of, horror...the horror, or a sort of haunted house or something like that. It's very kind of visual as well, at the same time, and speaks to the senses. And the fact that I think she draws on the language of fairy tales is...is quite interesting because, like I said, Andrea's kind of at the threshold between adolescence and adulthood and sometimes when she reaches for a way in which she wants to describe something positive or negative, I think that's the kind of language that comes to her intuitively. And...and to ma[ny]...many of us it would have, I think, because, you know, our childhood reading also shapes, perhaps, how we...how we see the world and how we think about it.

Christy Callaway-Gale 25:25
And you said that this passage is quite visual, are there any images that you want to pull out from the passage in particular for us to look at and think about in a bit more depth, maybe?

Daniela Omlor 25:36
So there's a lot of darkness that is created here. So if we look at 'las paredes tiznadas' but also the 'bodegón', so there's a kind of still life that she's describing 'sobre fondo negro' that is kind of mainly kept in dark colours. I mean, there's a kind of contrast between these fish that are, kind of, white presumably, or are kind of light-coloured, because she talks about them as being pale. So, I think that contrasts [with] other...other parts in the novel where the family of Ena is kind of seen through this almost golden light, you know, they all have kind of golden, flaxen hair, and so on. And here, like I said, it's...it's to do with Andrea's perception of the world. I mean, she doesn't...when she arrives at Calle Aribau, her family home, it's...it's not how she remembers it. There's sort of...there's furniture everywhere, it's this kind of dark place, when in her memory it was something quite different, almost enchanted. And here, it...she retains that idea of it being enchanted, but almost bewitched like a, you know, it's been cursed or something, it's very kind of dark and negative.

Christy Callaway-Gale 26:51
Throughout the passage, there are these repeated references to parts of the body and bodily functions. So we have hands, mouths, there's sweating, oozing, screaming, smiling. Why does Laforet describe the bathroom in this way?

Daniela Omlor 27:07
I mean, one easy way to think about it is that it's...it's personified. I mean, it's almost like Andrea feels a presence because later on she says, in contrast to that almost, that she... she...remained behind on her own—'quedé sola'. But here it's almost as if...as if there are living things surrounding her, they're all closing in on her, you know...and I think that that's neatly conveyed by using these kind of bodily...bodily images.

Christy Callaway-Gale 27:41
So how is Andrea's loneliness or her feeling out of place explored in this passage?

Daniela Omlor 27:48
Well nominally she's not lonely because we...you know, she's just joined her family, she's not living by herself or anything like that. But if we look at this passage, it ends with 'quedé sola entre la suciedad de las cosas', and she's just taken a shower so we would expect a kind of reference to cleanliness or something like that, but what sticks out is that she's all...all on her own, 'sola', and then what seems to stick to her is 'la suciedad de las cosas', so the kind of dirt, rather than the sort of refreshed, renewed self that she's...she's...You know, she's just taken a shower in order to cleanse herself of anything, but she doesn't seem to be able to rid herself. And maybe that dirt is kind of...kind of...is going to stick to her and, in some ways, she's also out of place because she's trying to be something that doesn't...seem to...befit this environment. So there's no harmony between the...between the environment and herself.

Christy Callaway-Gale 28:51
And thinking now about narrative perspective in the passage. So, like the rest of the novel, this is narrated in the first person from Andrea's perspective. And towards the end of the passage, she says that she starts to 'see strange things like drunk people do'. How does Laforet present the effect of the house on Andrea in this particular passage?

Daniela Omlor 29:15
Well, it's interesting that she says 'like drunk people do', so she's aware of how a drunk person would perceive it, but she also makes it very clear that that's not her case. So that then almost leaves the reader in a kind of double bind, because the reader is trying to think, well, if she's not drunk why would she...why would she describe it like that? So I think it really makes us sort of double back and turn...turn towards Andrea and makes…makes us think about what is going on there. I mean, what...what's going on in her head? Even '[l]a locura sonreía en los grifos torcidos', I mean, it seems quite matter of fact but then when we...when we look at what it actually means, that can't be a factual description of, you know, the kind of taps in the bathroom. So, is this a projection? You know, is Andrea trying to tell us something about herself by describing this place in a particular way? So rather than saying how she feels (you know, she feels threatened, she feels alone, she feels that she doesn't belong there and she's disappointed, and it's not what she's expected, and all these sort of feelings compounded), actually Laforet—in a way that's perhaps more poetic—offers us a description which makes us think that, very obviously, it can't be a kind of description of how things are. So, perhaps it's a more subtle way of telling us what Andrea's feeling, instead of having to say, you know, she felt this or I felt this at this moment in time, and perhaps more effective and more impactful.

Christy Callaway-Gale 30:58
How significant is this passage in the context of the rest of the novel? As you said it, it comes quite close to the beginning.

Daniela Omlor 31:07
I think it alerts the reader to the fact that all is not what it seems, including our narrator. So, in that sense it's significant because it...it appears early on in the novel, it sort of sets the example. On the other hand, you could also think of it as perhaps foreboding because Andrea's time in that household is not going to be a happy one. So, in many ways, those initial feelings are later on confirmed, in a way that is not so gothic as it is here.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 31:41
Thinking about applying for Modern Languages at uni? Well keep up to date with the latest episodes of the podcast and find out about our upcoming outreach events by following us on Twitter @OxMML_Schools.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 31:53
You might also like to take a look at our Modern Languages blog, 'Adventures on the Bookshelf'.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 32:01
This podcast was created by Professor Ben Bollig, produced by me, Christy Callaway-Gale, and brought to you by the Sub-faculty of Spanish at the University of Oxford. Special thanks goes to the tutors that participated and the Taylor Institution Library.

[MUSIC ENDS]