



Journal of Liberal Arts and Humanities (JLAH)
Issue: Vol. 6; No. 3; July 2025 (pp. 1-5)
ISSN 2690-070X (Print) 2690-0718 (Online)
Website: www.jlahnet.com
E-mail: editor@jlahnet.com
Doi:10.48150/jlah.v6no3.2025.a1

COMING OF AGE IN TWO NOVELS BY ANA MARÍA MATUTE AND SOLEDAD PUÉRTOLAS

By
Nancy S. Mason, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Spanish
Dalton State College

The theme of youth coming of age in a troubled world appeared in many post-Spanish Civil War novels such as Ana María Matute's classic Primera memoria, Years after the end of the War and the Franco dictatorship. the theme continued in works such as Soledad Puértolas' Todos mienten. Although the authors were born a generation apart, both present many parallels between the child's inner conflict of facing adulthood with the child's inner conflict with the child's negative, exterior world.

The young protagonist of Primera memoria grappled with two opposing worlds: her memories of parents and security before the War and her mother's death and the life of alienation and betrayal with a despised grandmother on a symbolic island. Javier, the young protagonist of Todos mienten, also moves through two different worlds. His mother, widow of a successful author, is frivolous and paradoxically happy or sad in hard to explain intervals. The more conventional world of his grandparents is marked by death, illness, and insanity.

For both, becoming an adult is somehow a betrayal of childhood. To be an adult is to sacrifice trust and honesty and give up the expectations and idealism of youth. Even in childhood there is no innocence that can be trusted. Matia in Primera Memoria perceives that her cousin Borja is a liar and a thief who is adept at feigning innocence. He steals money and cigarettes from his mother without being caught and deceives their grandmother with open shows of affection. Matia, at 14, believes that, at 15, Borja was "...an impio, débil and soberbio pedazo de hombre." (Primera 12).

The young protagonist of Todos mienten begins to distance himself from childhood as he studies the people around him with mistrust and misgivings. The major change in his life that occurs with the death of his father leads his mother to attempt to marry someone she does not love. His grandmother rejects the present to look longingly at her lost childhood in Mexico with nostalgia. He begins to note that everyone engages in some sort of self-deception or deception of others. In his house, he recalls, no one ever spoke of morality or ever tried to impart some sort of values on him or his brother. As he begins to move away from childhood, he starts to feel a loss. He notes: "Sentí que yo también había dado espalda a muchos tiempos muertos, introspectivos y felices, como los buenos recuerdos de mi abuela." A barrier existed between his world of past and present and he senses that there is no turning back.

Habían cercado mi infancia; estaban al otro lado de las habitaciones pobladas de humo, lágrimas y mujeres." Javier feels trapped in his new world, suffocated by his own preocupaciones, vague as they might be (Todos 54).

In Primera memoria, the young protagonists also feel the distancing from childhood. Before going to sleep, Matia fantasizes about a journey to an unknown destination. "En la hora de duermela la imaginaba como una barca flotando en un mar de niebla, en ruta hacia algún lugar al que no deseaba ir" (Primera 74). Matia intuitively senses the loss of youth of Manuel, a young man who mysteriously appears on a tragic day when she and Borja find a dead body in Borja's boat. When Manuel announces that the man is his father, Matia knows that he has lost his boyhood. She recalls his request to use Borja's boat to transport the body home. "Y Manuel, de pronto. No era un muchacho. No, bien cierto era que (quizá el mismo instante que pidió la barca, en la Ensenada de Santa Catalina, con una gaviota chillando destemplada, inoportuna) parecía muy distante su infancia, su juventud, hasta la vida misma. Y no había cumplido, seguramente, los dieciséis años" (Primera 43).

The absent father in both works is evident and is a cause of motivation of the young protagonists. They have no strong, guiding force to direct their lives. Further, the influence of the father in early life is an obscure, fleeting impression on their memories. Children thus become the sole interpreters of the society around them.

A problem faced by Matute by using children as critics is that the child's voice is both a mask for social criticism and becomes a contradiction. Children, traditionally regarded as a hope for the future, become clarions of despair. In reality, children often lack the life experience to accurately interpret the world around them. Their new experiences serve to emphasize the impact of current events.

Matute uses the Bible as a basis to interpret contemporary life. The outstanding example that links the Bible to the lives of the protagonists is the classic story of Cain and Abel. In Matute, the effect of jealousy leads to betrayal. The children in Matute associate betrayal with adulthood. When Matia and Borja betray Manuel in a one-sided friendship. The act pushes them into the corrupt world of adults. It is this act which unites the trilogy of Los mercaderes. In addition to Primera memoria, the subsequent novels of Los soldados lloran de noche and La trampa develop the symbolism of the money-changers whom Christ expelled from the Temple. The betrayal in Primera memoria is meant to better the desires of Borja at the expense of his friend

As in Matute's novel, Puértolas in Todos mienten emphasizes the desire for material gain in the lives of the protagonists. Javier, the young protagonist, receives advice from his uncle that earning money is the greatest good in life. After the untimely death of his father, Javier notes that his mother sells the movie rights of his father's writings and tells her son, "Lo he hecho por dinero" (Todos 24). Javier senses that his mother lacks true enthusiasm for the theatre. Even though her husband was a successful screen writer. She engages in self-doubt and self-deception in giving up the rights, as Javier thinks, "Porque pensaba que que era una especie de traición y que a nuestro padre le hubiera gustado realizar el mismo adaptación y no estaba convencida de que su decisión fuese correcta" (Todos 25).

This event is one of many in the life of the young protagonist which begin to reveal to him the various levels of deception in the lives of his family members and friends. Puértolas omits any overt allusion to the Bible but notes the inherently deceitful nature of the family members. As people begin to join the world of adults, they do so at the sacrifice of personal character. As in Matute's novel, the early life of Javier in the Puértolas work centers around the house of his grandmother. This house represents order. The grandmother, he recalls, imparted the same values that he learned in school, but confusing currents ran beneath the calm of their exterior lives. A lack of values is evident in this house. Javier recalls, "no se hablaba de principios" (24).

Matia and Javier have a similar opinion of the corruption of adults, yet each has a different focus on the adult world. While Matia resorts to various dreams and fantasies to sort things out, Javier is more analytical and notes the unfolding changes in people clinically, with direct observations about their changes in contact and values.

As he attempts to recall his father, Javier thinks of the pictures in the papers and his father's name over the theatres. Even though he can read his father's works, he cannot evoke a true memory of him. The reality of the situation is that he doubts that his father would recognize him if he walked in the house. This realization leaves Javier with one alternative: he renounces his father.

Matia also feels very much like an orphan. Although she is only 14, she feels her youth is slipping away. She frequently resorts to daydreams and nostalgic recollections of her early childhood. Her mother is dead and her father is away fighting in the Spanish Civil War, so Matia does not feel that she belongs to anyone or is part of a family. Unlike the protagonist in Puértolas who has no memory of his father, Matia remembers well but with sadness as she travels back mentally to the quiet, pastoral days of early childhood. Inwardly,

She exclaims, "(El huerto, la casa de mi padre, el bosque y el río, con los álamos. El río, con los remansos verdes y quietos, como grandes ojos de la tierra!)" (Primera 14).

The tangible reminders of her father help evoke an imaginary voice that seems to come out of an old wardrobe where she keeps her treasures. In this personal island in her grandmother's house, she keeps buttons, an Atlas, a tiny black doll, and stacks of white handkerchiefs.

She senses that her father's voice is coming out of the wardrobe as she remembers a long-ago day when she spoke to her father from the telephone office in her pueblo after her father left home. At that time, she was emotionally unprepared to answer. In the present, the memory is like an echo of the past. Matia recalls a tiny crystal ball her father gave her, one which produced snow when it was turned upside down. Her memories are cold and the word "padre" seems to be locked inside this tiny crystal ball. (*Primera* 116).

With her dreams and her imagination, Matia does not renounce her father but strives to return to a bygone, happier day by means of her imagination. A dream-like and elusive dimension of life is created with nostalgia.

According to J. Townsend Shelby, retrospection is a technique that is fundamental to understanding the writing of Ana María Matute. Most of Matute's protagonists are lonely people unable to meet the demands of society. Reverie can lead to a flight back in time. Retrospection can cause a preoccupation with earlier events of a person's life. Many of Matute's characters create a mental world where they move when personal conflicts are too great. (82).

Even though the matutean characters are still children, there is an obvious loss of innocence present in their fantasies and longings. Matia and Borja experience both dreams and nightmares in their summer of 1936. The departure from childhood is imminent but there is a point-counterpoint reaction to the passage. While Matia dreams about Alice in Wonderland, Borja abandons the world of fairy tales, apparently farther along in his passage to adulthood than his younger cousin. Matia senses the change in Borja: "Borja estaba solo de pie (adiós Peter Pan, adiós ya no podré ir contigo la próxima Limpieza de Primavera: tendrás que barrer solo todas las hojas caídas), quieto y dorado en medio de la plaza, brótandole de los ojos un reflejo de tío Alvaro." (*Primera* 164).

While his father is away at war, Borja fantasizes about a mysterious relative, Jorge de Son Major. His secret desire is to get to know this fantastic person who sailed to the Greek islands and led a life of adventure. Borja occupies his time with thoughts of Son Major and his father, Alvaro. Matia sees only herself as the center of the world. She studies her own reflection in a bathroom mirror as vapor rises from the bath water, creating an unreal atmosphere: Alicia en el mundo del espejo, pensé, más de una vez, contemplándome en él, desnuda y desolada, con un gran deseo de atravesar su superficie, que parecía gelatinosa. Tristísima imagen aquella—la mía—de ojos asustados, que era, tal vez, la imagin misma de la soledad (*Primera* 73).

According to Cirlot, mist symbolizes things not yet determined (211-212). Mist is represented by vapor in front of the mirror, which has a magical quality and makes it mythical. Associated with water, the mirror is a symbol of the Narcissus myth. Images can appear and disappear in a glass; Matia is concerned only with herself and her own loneliness. She is fearful of the adult world and afraid to pass through the glass and leave her childhood.

Matia reacts with disbelief when confronted with the horrors of the adult world. The murder of José Taronjé, Manuel's father. Is an event she hardly can believe. The assassination horrifies her:

Parecía mentira, parecía algo raro, de pesadilla. Pero era Manuel, su hijo, quien lo contaba. Y estaba allí, delante de nosotros, con su sombra alargándose en el suelo, sesgada e irreal (*Primera* 45-46).

She retains images from her childhood to deal with the event but the images, related to happy times with a puppet theatre, now are grotesque. Matute incorporates images from the *comedia dell'arte* to evoke Matute's world, drawing on her own childhood fascination with puppets. José Taronjé, the murdered man, is like Pulcinella—a hunchback dwarf. In death, at the bottom of a ravine, Taronjé, has a broken back. He now is a "polichenela," a tattered puppet.

Borja lacks sympathy for Manuel either during the initial meeting or later, when he learns that Manuel is really the illegitimate son of his idol, Jorge de Son Major. A master of feigning childhood innocence while stealing from his mother and grandmother,

Borja decides to settle the score with Manuel by setting him up with a false accusation of theft. The parish priest hears Borja's confession and involves himself in the apprehension of Manuel, who is accused of stealing money from Borja's grandmother and as a result is sent to reform school as a punishment. Shifts of time and flashbacks develop the story from Matia's perspective. She becomes a participant with her silence, thus betraying Manuel in a more treacherous way than Borja.

A conflict between brothers is present in Todos mienten. While Javier has problems coming to terms with the deceit of adults, his brother, Federico, mocks his brother and calls him immature. In early life, Javier recalls, both brothers were very much alike. After Federico, who has an affinity for music, goes away to school for three years, Javier notes that they are growing apart. The rift between the two cannot be mended.

During a school recital, Javier notes the departure, but without the sadness and nostalgia of Matia. "Entonces comprendí que ya estábamos lejos del pasado, que todo el tiempo oscuro había sido dejado atrás....Y eso fue lo que me emocionó y porque trague saliva porque no podía llorar; me había fijado como norma el control de las emociones (Todos 35).

The distinct worlds in which they live have an unreal quality to them, but it is an unreality based on deception rather than imagination. The two brothers contemplate what their lives might have been if their father had lived. Federico is aware of the superficial nature of his parent's relationship. He explains: "Cuando hablo de él emplea un tono irreal, como si dudara de que hubiera existido...Se casó con él porque le recordaba al abuelo y a sus aspiraciones de escritor..." (Todos 44).

The mother maintains an air of deception as she prepares to take a trip to Italy with a suitor. The trip is really for herself but she hides behind the pretext that the trip is for the two boys. The two sons realize too late that the suitor and mother have serious plans. Federico capitalizes on the situation and employs Baquedano to find a place for his band. Javier inwardly reproaches his mother for her designs on them. "Ese era el papel reservado para Federico y para mí: Portarnos como dos idiotas, aceptar su juego y sacar de ellas nuestras propias ventajas" (Todos 80).

As they prepare for the trip, the sons observe that their mother is acting. Federico confronts her and behind her back remarks that she is "overacting." Javier senses that "parecía mi madre imitando a otra persona" (Todos 83).

The subsequent broken engagement adds a new dimension to Javier's fears of finishing his education, getting married, and living on his own. Javier thinks: "Había alternativas que habían al final, me había paralizado la idea de la soledad de mi madre" (Todos 84). Federico feels that the breakup of the mother with her suitor was an injustice on the part of the mother. Javier lacks any romantic sentiment about the incident and senses that Baquedano reacts like a "viejo jugador" who knew from the start that he would lose and now has turned his efforts in another direction. The mother feels that she is a victim of destiny. When the young protagonist confronts her and admonishes her for not taking advantage of the opportunity to change her life, she replies: "—¿Crees que las cosas son así de fáciles? A lo mejor soy simplemente una mujer que se ha resignado" (Todos 159).

As he begins to mature, Federico also gives up his aspirations to be a famous musician. He decides it is better to take chances, even if he makes mistakes, than to do nothing.

The long history of a school friend who treats life as a game and enters into several dubious business transactions makes Javier envious. He wonders if he could ever be like Chicho. "Todo era raro en él, ese perfecto mentiroso que acaso creía en sus propias mentiras." Javier does not know what to think of "...ese ser fantasioso" and asks himself "...si sería capaz de hacer una verdadera maldad" (140). Chicho admits that he has a good business sense but uncovers an inner unhappiness with the motivation of the things he does to succeed in life. "Los hago por las personas que me importan, solo que ya no me importa nadie" (Todos 166). Chicho attacks Javier as being one of those who can separate the important things from the trivial, but Chicho cannot do this. Sadly, Chicho feels that he is tossed about by Destiny: "La vida nos empuja y nos agita y solo podemos desdoblarnos: observarla mientras estamos en el centro de ella, porque todo transcurre al mismo tiempo" (Todos 167).

The choices of life are not rejected by Javier, but he envies the facility that Chicho and his brother Federico have to exploit them. Ill with heap titis, the differences between the brothers intensifies, Javier thinks: “Una vez más, lo envidiaba, no solo por el hecho de ser capaz de dar a su vida ese tinte frívolo, intrascendente. sino, sobre todo, porque sabía exponerlo, comunicarlo” (Todos 182.)

During his convalescence, Javier, who is not a young businessman, must confront his own entrapment in the deceptions of life. His cousin Barbara, unhappily married to his childhood friend Chicho, reveals her attraction to him with a kiss on his lips. The act awakens in Javier a realization of the true nature of human beings. The kiss represented Barbara’s alienation from her husband, her disillusionment with her marriage. Yet the behavior is hard to understand. Javier presents his philosophy in this way: “Todos mienten, me dije, todos se esfuerzan, todos esconden algo, tal vez lo, mismo: el miedo, la impotencia, la soledad, la Muerte, En mayor o menor medida, todos han de convivir con eso. Yo también mentía: sonreía. Aceptaba y besaba y no hablaba de mis frustraciones. A veces, me derrumaba o vivía al borde del derrumbamiento Todos lo hacían. (Todos 182).

Works Consulted

- Cirlot, Jack E. A Dictionary of Symbols, Trans. By Jack Sage. New York: Philosophical Library. 1962.
- Matute, Ana María. Primera nenoria. 10 ed. Barcelona: Destino, 1992.
- Puértolas, Soledad. Todoso mienten. 2 ed. Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 1988.
- Shelby, J. Townsend. “Retrospection as a Technique in Matute’s Los hijos muertos and En esta tierra. Revista de Estudios Hispánicos, 14.2, May, 1980: 81-95.